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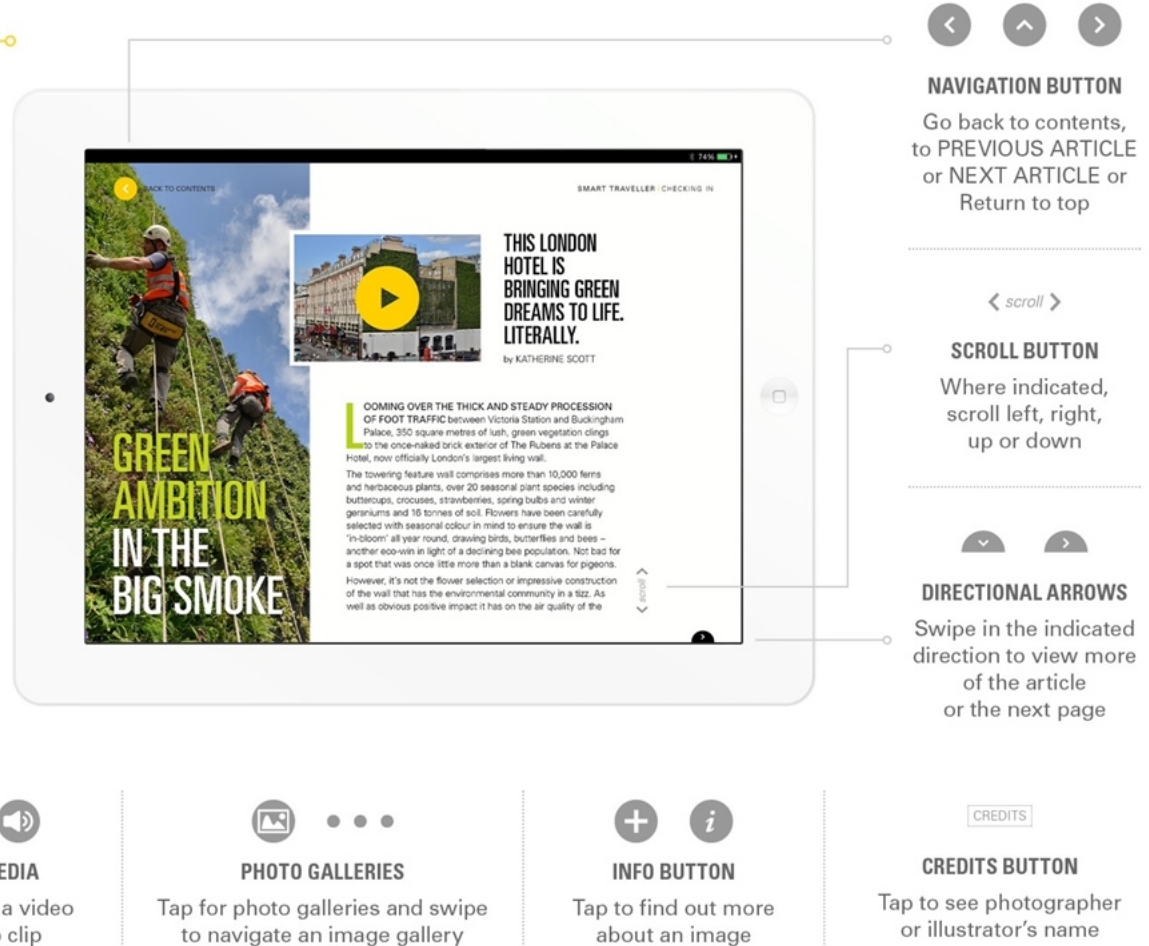
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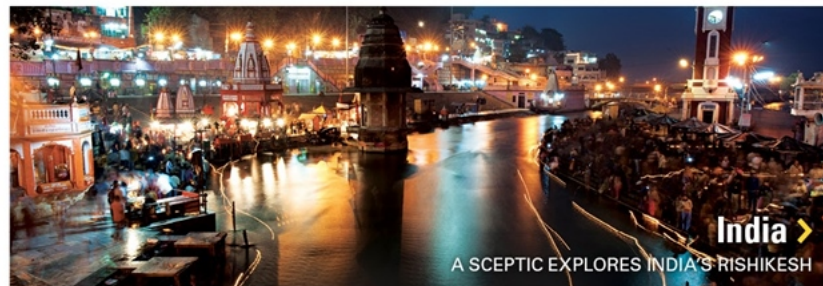
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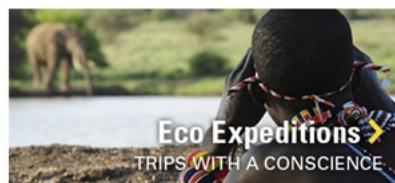
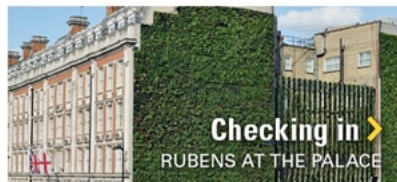


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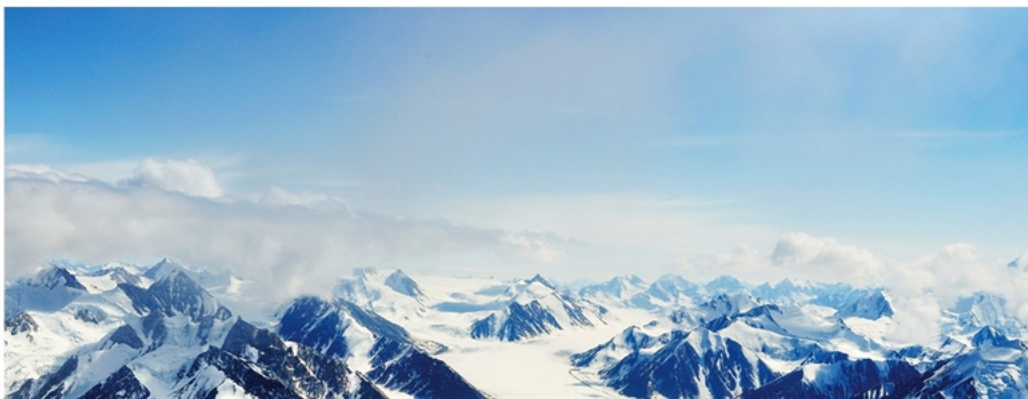
FOR A FEW DAYS IN SEPTEMBER, I was lucky enough to join many others who work for National Geographic for a conference at the company's headquarters in Washington DC.

From talks by extraordinary National Geographic explorers and photographers, to discussions about the many initiatives happening across the world in publishing, events and marketing, to sessions about striking the right balance between digital and print publishing, it was an inspiring few days filled with brainstorming sessions and interesting interactions.

A highlight of the conference for me was the chance to look through Alexander Graham Bell's photographic diaries detailing some of his many experiments – just some of many amazing items in the National Geographic archives. Something not a lot of people know is that he was one of the founding members of the National Geographic Society and was the Society's second president. What a remarkable man, among many others who have been a part of the Nat Geo family over the past 126 years.

I also had the chance to meet many of the other editors of *National Geographic Traveller* magazine. After almost 30 years on the scene, *Traveller* has 16 international editions with a

Check out some fantastic videos and photo galleries in our digital edition. Last month I visited Kluane National Park in the Yukon. You can see the video by Cory Trepanier of this spectacular region on our app. Visit natgeotraveller.com.au





“After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world.” – Phillip Pullman

combined readership of around 7.3 million people. And what brought us all together is the pursuit of creating content that makes a difference. While video is an integral part of that process, it's obviously not a new thing for Nat Geo. During a tour of the photographic and video archives, while being shown some of the earliest explorers' videos – from the first decade of 1900s in scratchy black and white footage – it occurred to me that Nat Geo has always been documenting the world around us and telling moving stories. When you think about it, the society was a pioneer in storytelling by video.

Well, rest assured that soon you'll see more inspiring videos and exciting interviews coming from us, as we develop our digital edition of *Traveller* magazine alongside our website natgeotraveller.com.au. But in the meantime, enjoy the read and drop us a line anytime, as we love hearing from you and we value your feedback.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michelle Hespe'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized 'M' and 'H'.

Michelle Hespe



"Let there be light."

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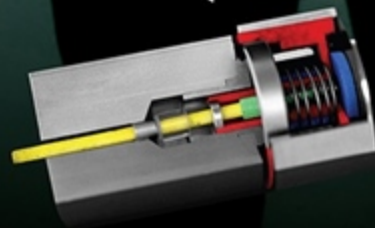
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*Many who've read Thompson's **Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas** would've fought an urge to embark on a road-trip across the US.*

by **FIONA HUNT**

Managing Director, Adventure World

A few weeks back I sat in a London hotel reading a book on Lizzy Siddal, wife of Dante Rossetti, Pre-Raphaelite artist in her own right, and model for the famous Millais painting of *Ophelia*. The book wraps up with Lizzie's stay at The Red House, home to designer William Morris, leader of the arts and crafts movement in England. A quick Google revealed the house was just outside London, so off I went the next day on a trip to Bexleyheath.

This diversion is a great example of the power of books as travel companions. They might make you change your travel plans and maybe even have you booking a spontaneous flight.

The beauty of historical tales is that they allow us to experience both the past and the present simultaneously. I recall in my backpacker days, wandering through the rainy streets of Mayfair, a crumpled copy of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in hand, searching for Lord Henry Wotton's house. The book took me in and out of centuries as the drizzly mists created a convincing 1890's London around me.

Some books can illuminate different facets of destinations. For instance, *Maximum City* by Suketu Mehta shows the good, bad, unfathomable and absurdities of Mumbai. Reading Picasso's *Guernica* inspired my travels through Spain and also delivered me to the door of the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid to stand in front of one of Picasso's magnificent masterpieces.

So it's not just guidebooks that do the pushing. Many who've read Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* or Kerouac's *On The Road* or Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley* would've fought an urge to embark on a road-trip across the US.

A friend of mine read *Labyrinth* by Kate Moss, set in Carcassonne and the Languedoc



@AW_Fiona



FILMS



Mr Turner

A hit at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival, with actor Timothy Spall scooping the award for Best Actor, Director Mike Leigh's *Mr Turner* tells the story of the great and eccentric British painter, J.M.W. Turner. Considered radical and revolutionary for his time, Turner was always up to something worthy of note – whether it was painting, being entertained by country aristocracy, visiting brothels, and in one classic example of his dedication to art, being strapped to the mast of a ship so that he could capture a snowstorm on canvas.



My Old Lady

Wryly hilarious and intensely engaging, *My Old Lady* tells the tale of Mathias Gold, a hard-on-his-luck New Yorker who moves to Paris to claim an apartment that he has inherited from his estranged father. The film's breathtaking cinematography takes you through the Parisian locales, as its rich and singularly unique plot unfolds around you. With affecting performances by Maggie Smith, Kevin Klein and Kristin Scott-Thomas, *My Old Lady* has the capacity to elicit emotions you didn't even know you had.

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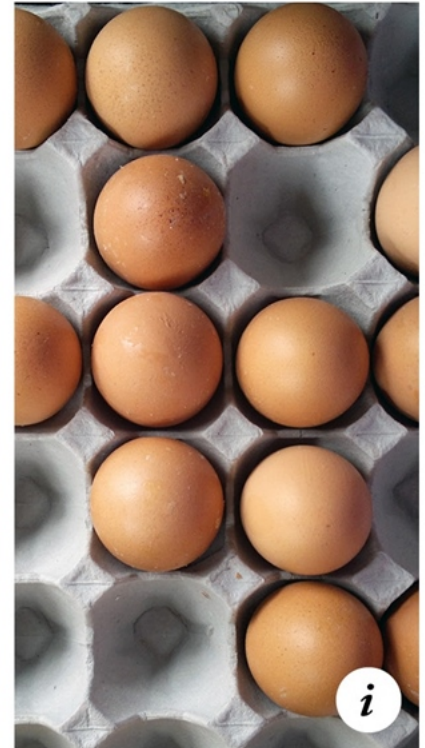
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Pulling together an exhibition on the Aztecs is no small feat, but it's one that Kim McKay, Director and CEO of the Australian Museum in Sydney, revelled in. The results of her and her dedicated team's hard work is now on display at the museum, drawing in the crowds and keeping history and art buffs well and truly satiated.

CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSE

BACK IN THE 13TH CENTURY, the Aztecs, as we call them today, were known as Chichimecas, which translates as 'barbarians'. They were the last of their kind and as legend has it, they left a mythical island called Aztlán in search of a place to settle. Following a long migration period, Lake Texcoco was the chosen spot for settlement, as the Aztecs' guardian god, Huitzilopochtli, sent them a sign: an eagle atop a cactus eating a snake. On their chosen land, the Aztecs reigned for more than 500 years in the region that today is called Mesoamerica, aka the Mexica or Aztec Empire.

The Aztecs were imperialists, and in the centuries that they reigned as mythically inspired warriors, they managed to take 400 or more towns, extending their empire beyond the Mexican border and into Central America. Family and religion were pivotal elements of Aztec society, and brutal rituals such as sacrificing human hearts and blood to keep the sun

and, in turn, life itself moving, are gory proof that superstition was also cemented into daily life alongside a staunch belief in myths and legends. Similar to the roots of Christianity, they believed that the Earth was the centre of the universe and above, there were 13 heavens where their gods lived, and below, nine underworlds of which Mictlantecuhtli, god of death, ruled the lowest one.

Although the Aztec empire eventually fell after eight long months of being under siege by the Tlaxcalans (allies to Hernán Cortés and his fellow Spanish conquistadors) the Aztec people survived, their descendants living on today in Mexico. Mexico still upholds the eagle perched on a cactus as its national emblem and today there are many places in Mexico where traces of the Aztecs remain.

Learn more about the AZTECS, showing at the Australian Museum until February 1, 2015.





Kim McKay is the driver behind the AZTECS showcase. For the past 25 years her life has revolved around social innovation, marketing, communications, history, art and environmentalism. Working on the AZTECS exhibition has been a project that she has relished.

Q. *What extraordinary thing did you learn about the Aztecs while working on the exhibit?*

A. They were the first culture in the world to make education compulsory for all children (both boys and girls). While the basis of the education was steeped in military training, the Aztecs also taught maths, their language, writing, reading and the arts.

Q. *Do you have a favourite piece from the exhibit?*

A. A pottery object which is thought to represent the Aztec fascination with the passing of time. A whole youthful face can be seen at the centre, framed by an older face, framed by a corpse with closed eyes. It's an incredibly sophisticated piece showing the transition from youth to the afterlife.

Q. *What do you hope visitors gain from this exhibition?*

A. The Australian Museum is the museum of Australia and the Pacific. The Aztec culture is part of this Pacific history and we are always interested in bringing new audiences to the Museum to experience another culture. We're doing that through exciting programming including lectures, cultural nights, even Mexican cooking demonstrations and a class on how to mix the perfect margarita!

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QUEEN *of the* BEES

by MICHELLE HESPE

“Think about it. How many people do you think burn paraffin candles during Earth Hour?” asks beeswax candle maker Cate Burton.



CATE BURTON, OTHERWISE KNOWN AS QUEEN B, has created a business selling 100 per cent beeswax candles. High stress levels led Burton to leaving a high-flying corporate job, and she then began to roll candles because she found it to be therapeutic. However It wasn't long before she became transfixed by the production of a completely natural product that had the potential to change lives.

Many people opt for soy candles rather than paraffin ones, but don't realise that they too are often laden with chemicals, despite a common claim from soy wax suppliers and makers of soy candles that they are eco-friendly. Soy candles are chemically processed from the oil of genetically modified, commercially farmed (with pesticides) soybeans, and most are scented with chemicals.

Burton has now spent 12 years studying bees and beeswax, and she's pleased to see that change is in the air. And it's not just individuals who are thinking about what they are burning. “Recently I've had companies such as Dinosaur Designs approach me to create



Wildlife Warrior

*Wildlife conservationist and National Geographic Emerging Explorer
Krithi Karanth in the field in India*

by KATIE KNOROVSKY

In 2012 the Supreme Court of India cited findings by the 34-year-old conservation biologist in a landmark case that overturned a ban on visiting tiger sanctuaries in favour of smart regulations promoting responsible tourism. Consider it the moment Karanth earned her stripes. Make that more stripes: as a young girl in Karnataka, Karanth spent her summers tracking tigers, leopards and other predators with her father and other esteemed scientists. Later she earned advanced degrees from Yale, Duke and Columbia; in 2011, Karanth won National Geographic's 10,000th research grant. Based in Bangalore, she probes boundaries – between humans and animals as well as those around this male-dominated field. Here she talks wildlife travel:

WILD CHILD My most vivid early memories are sitting quietly with my dad in a park watchtower at Nagarhole National Park, for five or six hours at a time with only binoculars. At the end of the day – if I behaved – he'd drive me through the jungle. That's what I looked forward to all day. I saw my first leopard when I was around one and a half. I don't go looking for tigers and leopards, but it's a rush to see one.

EYE OF THE TIGER People need to be willing to say, "If I see a tiger, I'm lucky" – not "My trip is successful only if I see one." India also has leopards, elephants, the incredible Asiatic wild dog, critically endangered frogs, and a huge diversity of birds.

MOUNTAIN TIME I could hike the Western Ghats mountain range for days. The views go on endlessly, in extraordinary shades of blue and green. It's one of India's biodiversity hotspots, with 20 per cent of the country's tigers, the largest number of Asian elephants, three bear species, leopards. Most people come to India between



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SMART TRAVELLER



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THIS LONDON HOTEL IS BRINGING GREEN DREAMS TO LIFE. LITERALLY.

by KATHERINE SCOTT

**GREEN
AMBITION
IN THE
BIG SMOKE**

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HEART & SOUL

After almost five years of being a hot fave on the Sydney restaurant and bar scene, Bloodwood continues to lure in new fans with its exotic food and flavour combinations.

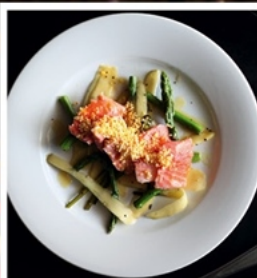
SIZING UP THE EXPOSED BRICK WALLS THAT SUPPORT A DECOUPAGE OF OLD DOORS stuck to the ceiling, through which an entanglement of cords and bare bulbs hang, you might presume that you've walked into the warehouse studio of an eccentric artist. Add some blood-red wooden-topped tables, an assortment of mismatched modern metal chairs and a throng of leather seats skirting the brick wall, and you've got Bloodwood restaurant's main dining room. It's a warm space, and one that's always bursting at the seams with conversation, laughter, the sound of glasses clinking and scent of delicious meals cooking. It's a place that many call their second home.

Chefs Mitchel Grady and Claire Van Vuuren opened Bloodwood five years ago and, ever since, it's been a well-loved favourite on Sydney's dining circuit. "There's heart and soul here, and you feel it when you walk in" says Van Vuuren. "Our regulars have been coming back since the beginning and have grown with us. We've made life-long friends and had an amazing time doing so."

Grady and Van Vuuren have a simple grounding philosophy that is the secret to Bloodwood's success. "It's about cooking food that we love to eat," says Grady. "And creating a sense of familiarity within each and every dish."

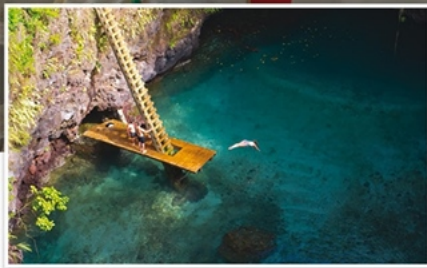
The polenta chips, for one, are a familiar staple for locals when indulging in the ever-

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VANCOUVER

SEA TO SKY

by David McGonigal

Sandwiched between Georgia Strait and the Coast Mountains, Vancouver is one of the world's most liveable – and visitable – cities. It's not just the picturesque location that makes Vancouver a winner. It reflects both its historical foundation as the western end of the trans Canadian rail line and today's role as Canada's gateway to Asia. Bounded by water, mountains and the US border, the city rewards exploration.



STANLEY PARK

The world's best park (*Trip Advisor 2014*) is a delightful temperate rainforest next to the CBD with more than 30 km of forest and seawall trails to explore on a walk, run or cycle. Visit near dawn to enjoy the aquarium and totem poles to spot beavers, racoons and sea otters.

GRANVILLE ISLAND

A short ferry ride to these markets provides more than maple syrup and BC cherries, with craft breweries, a sake maker, and gin and vodka distilleries. Vancouver Theatre Sports League opposite the Kids' market is an improv theatre with regular workshops and events.

MOUNTAIN EQUIPMENT

Founded in Vancouver in 1971, Mountain Equipment Co-op (MEC) at 130 West Broadway is the go-to outdoor department store. It also rents cycling, watersports, climbing, camping and snowsports gear. Other local brands have outlets too: Arc'Teryx in North Vancouver and the Lululemon Lab at 511 West Broadway.

GROUSE MOUNTAIN

The ski runs here (visible from the city) can be reached by gondola or a one-hour (for the fit) Grouse Grind trail. See lumberjacks at work and check out the viewing platform on the Eye of the Wind turbine that provides views of the city and the spectacular volcanic cone of Mt Baker in the USA.

SALMON

Vancouverites are proud of their variations of salmon, including chinook, coho, steelhead and sockeye. Jump aboard a salmon fishing charter or dine on salmon cooked on a cedar plank or cured in maple syrup. Also sample the Dungeness crab.

JAPANESE FUSION

A strong Japanese culture influenced by western tastes provides Vancouver with a wide range of dining options. Zakkushi Dining on Main (4075) is a Japanese tapas bar that prides itself on its Binchotan charcoal yakitori.

SETTLEMENT BUILDING

Vancouver's burgeoning food scene can be sampled here in this restored industrial complex at 55 Dunlevy Ave in Railtown. Belgard Kitchen provides food, FreshTAP has wines on tap, Postmark Brewing offers tasting flights and the Vancouver Urban Winery offers a tasting bar.

POINT GREY

Venturing to the University of British Columbia at the end of Point Grey takes you to the Greenhart Canopy Walkway, a surprisingly thrilling (and wobbly) forest experience. UBC's Beaty Biodiversity Museum is a wonderful space with a blue whale skeleton and the Museum of Anthropology offers an enriching insight into First Nation culture.



VIETNAMESE STREET TREATS

Vietnam's culinary influences come from far and wide, incorporating anything from French to Chinese cultures. Keep in mind that often the best meals are enjoyed on a rickety plastic stool beside a traffic-clogged street, while the list of must-try dishes is virtually endless.

by GUY WILKINSON



VIETNAMESE CHICKEN CURRY *(Ca Ri Ga)*



BEEF WRAPPED IN BETEL LEAF *(Bo La Lot)*



JELLYFISH (*Goi Sua*)



SEAFOOD HOT POT (*Lau Hai San*)





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VIET RICE PAPER ROLLS *(Mon Cuon)*



MAKING VIETNAMESE SPRING ROLLS (1:09)

Anantara Mui Ne sous chef, Hoa, demonstrates rolling cold Vietnamese spring rolls or Goi cuon.

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BIRD WHISPERER

BIRDMAN GEORGE IS FROM ATIU IN THE COOK ISLANDS. HIS REAL NAME IS GEORGE MATEARIKI AND HE KNOWS THE FEATHERED LOCALS WELL. by MICHELLE HESPE



Birdman George stands stock-still – only the sound of wind pushing its way through the thick glossy banana palm leaves can be heard – and everyone in the small group of people mimics his unwavering stance. He steps nimbly off the dirt track and stares piercingly into Atiu Island's jungle canopies. He lifts the fingers of one hand to his mouth and makes the sound of a Rimatara lorikeet. There's a flash of colour and one bird moves. Darts. George calls out, laughs to himself, and makes the noise again. There's another flash of colour and two birds move closer so that the twitchers in the group, all tense with high hopes of seeing some of Atiu's birds, gasp. Then there's a unison of sighs quickly replaced by a swishing of camera lenses.

Atiu is the third largest of the 15 islands that make up the Cook Islands and its 27 square kilometres is now a haven for birds.

Hundreds of years ago, local people intently watched these birds too, but for a different reason: their stunning red plumage was plucked and used to adorn the ceremonial clothing of Polynesian chiefs.

Atiu is the third largest of the 15 islands that make up the Cook Islands and its 27 square kilometres is now a haven for birds. There are native doves, pigeons, kingfishers, flycatchers and lorikeets, and unlike many Pacific Islands, Atiu has managed to protect and breed them, gradually killing off the invasive pest that is the dreaded myna bird.

George is employed to look after the 30 or so Rarotongan flycatchers (Kakerori) that were brought to Atiu between 2001 and 2003 for a recovery program. In 1992, the birds only numbered 29 in Rarotonga, so moves were made to ensure numbers didn't dwindle further. Rats from ships regularly docking in Rarotonga were killing the flycatchers, so George also sets rat traps at the island's entry point to keep his beloved birds and the island safe.

The Rimatara lorikeet was also taken to Atiu for safety in 2007, and today they are flourishing. The lorikeets' young, fresh from the nest, were being killed by the myna as soon as the hatchlings took their first flight. That's one of the many reasons that the 400 residents of Atiu agree with the \$2 bounty on the mynas' heads.

George takes his guests into the jungle and out into fields and crops to show them the many species of plants used for food and medicinal purposes. He also fires up an impressive earth oven on which he prepares a traditional lunch of fish, chicken, fruit and salad for his tour guests. After a few hours trekking about Atiu looking for birds, it's a welcome rest. It's then that George shares local tales and legends, and explains that Atiu was originally called Enuamanu. Fittingly, that translates as 'Island of the Birds'.

> VIDEO



ATIU - COOK ISLANDS (01:38)

Take a step off the beaten track to a remote island in the Cook Islands.

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GREECE

elephant parade

After the lives of a man and a baby elephant crossed paths in Thailand, artists from across the world unite every year to paint polyresin pachyderms – to save the real ones from extinction.

by MICHELLE HESPE





MOSHA WAS A BABY ELEPHANT when she stepped on a landmine in Chiang Mai, Thailand, blowing off the bottom half of her leg. As fate would have it an entrepreneur from Paris – with a penchant for art – heard of her accident while he was holidaying in Northern Thailand, and the cogs of destiny cranked into motion. Within a year, Mosha went from being just an elephant to the pin-up pachyderm of charity.

It was the year 2000 and the art-loving entrepreneur holidaying in Chiang Mai was Marc Spits. Having been the agent for Smurfs creator Pierre Culliford among many other things, Spits was no stranger to success stories. And he knew his way around art and business.

Mosha, in the meantime, had been taken into the care of Soraida Salwala, who in 1993 had opened the world's first Asian elephant hospital, in Chiang Mai. As a child, she'd seen an elephant shot after being hit by a car and vowed to help elephants when she was old enough. Salwala had a prosthetic leg made for Mosha.

Spits heard the story of Mosha and Salwala when he was on holiday. He also happened to come across some talented illustrators in the local newspapers, so he contacted them and had a cartoon drawing made of Mosha. And so it was that Spits took the illustration and the seed of an idea back to Paris with him.

Back in Paris, Spits was restless. Mosha's experience had touched him and he wanted to create a charity for elephants. But he was 70 years old and he wasn't sure if he had the energy to do it. Enter his son, Mike Spits. "Dad said he wanted to start this charity, and he said he wanted me to do it with him," Mike laughs. "I liked his idea, but I had a full-time job. I still look back and think, 'How did this happen?' " But it did; Mike left his job and in 2006 he and his father founded Elephant Parade. As CEO, Mike has been working on it ever since.





The company has headquarters in Amsterdam and an office in Chiang Mai. Right from the beginning the idea has stayed pretty much the same: artists paint life-sized models of Mosha (she was a baby at the time, so the models are not adult-size) made of fibreglass and polyresin, which are sold at auctions in cities across the world to raise money for elephant conservation. Sometimes there have been hundreds of elephants in one city, at other times a herd of 30 to 50.

Today, Elephant Parade has raised more than \$7 million, with auction proceeds and an additional 20 per cent of all Elephant Parade profits donated to the Asian Elephant Foundation. It attracts some very well-known artists; one elephant by UK artist Jack Vettriano sold for £155,000.

Limited-edition handcrafted replicas and other products are also created from the exhibition elephants, and an Elephant Parade ArtBox has been released so people can buy a pack and enter into a competition to paint the best Mosha. The winning design will be painted onto a full-size Elephant Parade elephant and be a part of Elephant Parade Bangkok in 2015. The winner will be flown to Bangkok from their home city and will reveal their design at the Elephant Parade VIP launch party, and spend three nights at the Anantara Bangkok Riverside Resort & Spa.

To this day, Elephant Parade still pays for Mosha's care, sending Friends of Asian Elephants one million baht a year. Their ongoing work is an enduring story of man, beast and kindness – the bright elephants parading through the world a vivid legacy that paints hope across the future.

The next Elephant Parade is in Bangkok in 2015. Visit elephantparade.com



Madrid

WITH KIDS

by SIMONE HENDERSON-SMART

Spain's national capital has got the kids covered, with massive parks full of animals, rides and waterslides and a treat you dunk in chocolate.



Escape to GREECE

The true allure of Greece is due to less tangible attributes - the dazzling clarity of the light and the Aegean waters, the floral aromas that permeate the air, the spirit of the place - for there is hardly a grove, mountain or stream that is not sacred to a deity, and the ghosts of the past still linger everywhere.



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FROM THE HIGHEST HEIGHTS

DOING AS THE MONKS DO IN A GREEK WORLD-HERITAGE LISTED MOUNTAIN RANGE IS NOT AS SIMPLE AS IT MAY SEEM.

Words and photography by JOE WORTHINGTON





A **UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE**; an Orthodox Christian shrine; a home for mythical creatures and spiritual gods; the six Metéora Monasteries have puzzled and intrigued visitors to the region for hundreds of years. Who built them? How were they built so high without modern-day technology? Why were they built? And importantly, how do you get up to them?





STANDING 457 METRES IN THE AIR AND DOMINATING THE LOCAL SKYLINE, THE TOWERING PINDUS MOUNTAIN RANGE HOUSES GREECE'S GREATEST SECRET.

A visit to Metéora would not be complete until you have followed in the footsteps of the forefathers of this region's monasteries. The 14th-century hermit monks abstained from all of life's pleasures, from possession of material wealth, speaking and eating luxury foods; so that they could devote their lives to God and spiritual reflection. After hiking in thin leather sandals for weeks to find the perfect spot to build a permanent shrine to God, clambering over sky-scraping cliffs and cragged rocks, the wandering servants of the Lord convened at the foot of the tallest, least accessible sandstone cliff and began work on the first of many monasteries. As the 800-year Byzantine reign began to draw to a close, and the Turkish Ottoman dawn started to rise at the end of the 14th century, safe refuge was secured with the completion of the Holy Monastery of Great Metéoron.

In the days before modern machinery, visitors to the monastery were put to the ultimate test. Legend has it that the only way to reach the top of the cliff

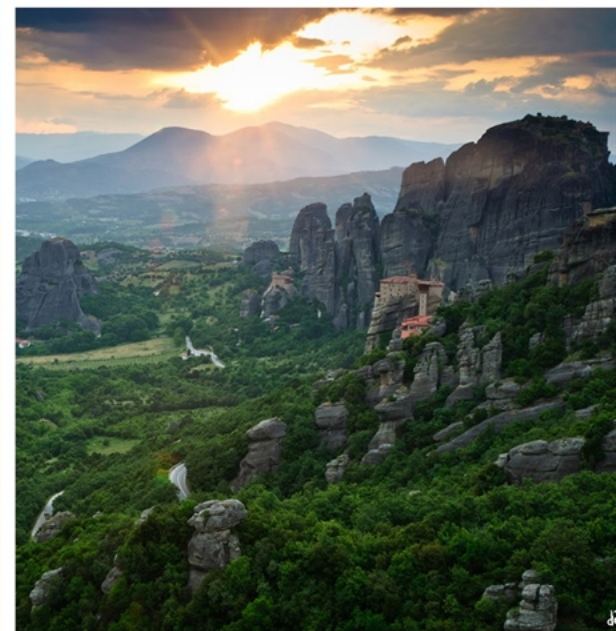
IF THE VISITING MONK OR NUN SURVIVED THE CLIMB THEN GOD WOULD WELCOME THEM AT THE PEAK.

this was the work of the Almighty. The nets were only ever replaced when “the Lord let them break”... thankfully these days stone steps circle their way around the cliff, but if you're feeling devilishly fearless then why not give climbing up a rope a try, keeping in mind the many modern health and safety regulations.

Throughout the following 200 years after the completion of the first monastery, another 19 were built with sheer sweat and tears shed for the love of God, each with its own character and community of believers. Although only six monasteries have survived the stresses and strains of the years, it becomes obvious to any visitor to the region why the monks built their monasteries atop the tallest rock formations in modern-day Trikala Prefecture; they are notoriously difficult to get to. At the start and end of every day, from any of the Monasteries, it is possible to see the remaining five; Varlaam, Rousanou, St Nicholas Anapausas, St Stephen and Holy Trinity; lined up in a neat row with the rising and setting of the sun in the background, lighting the path as if a sign from the Lord.

Around Metéora, stars have shone both in the skies and on the ground for well over a decade. Lara Croft (Tomb Raider) has swung from the rafters of the Monastery of St Nicholas Anapausas; James Bond has strutted his stuff around





Around Metéora, stars have shone both in the skies and on the ground for well over a decade. Lara Croft (Tomb Raider) has swung from the rafters of the Monastery of St Nicholas Anapausas; James Bond has strutted his stuff around the Monastery of the Holy Trinity in *For Your Eyes Only*; and the region was used as the backdrop for the *Game of Thrones*' House of Arryn. The sheer potential that Metéora holds is mind-blowing. You could be your very own action hero, jumping across the deep ravines and swimming through the chilly waters of Peneiós on a freezing misty morning.

But are you ready to leave the present behind? Can you handle living the life of a hermit for just one day?

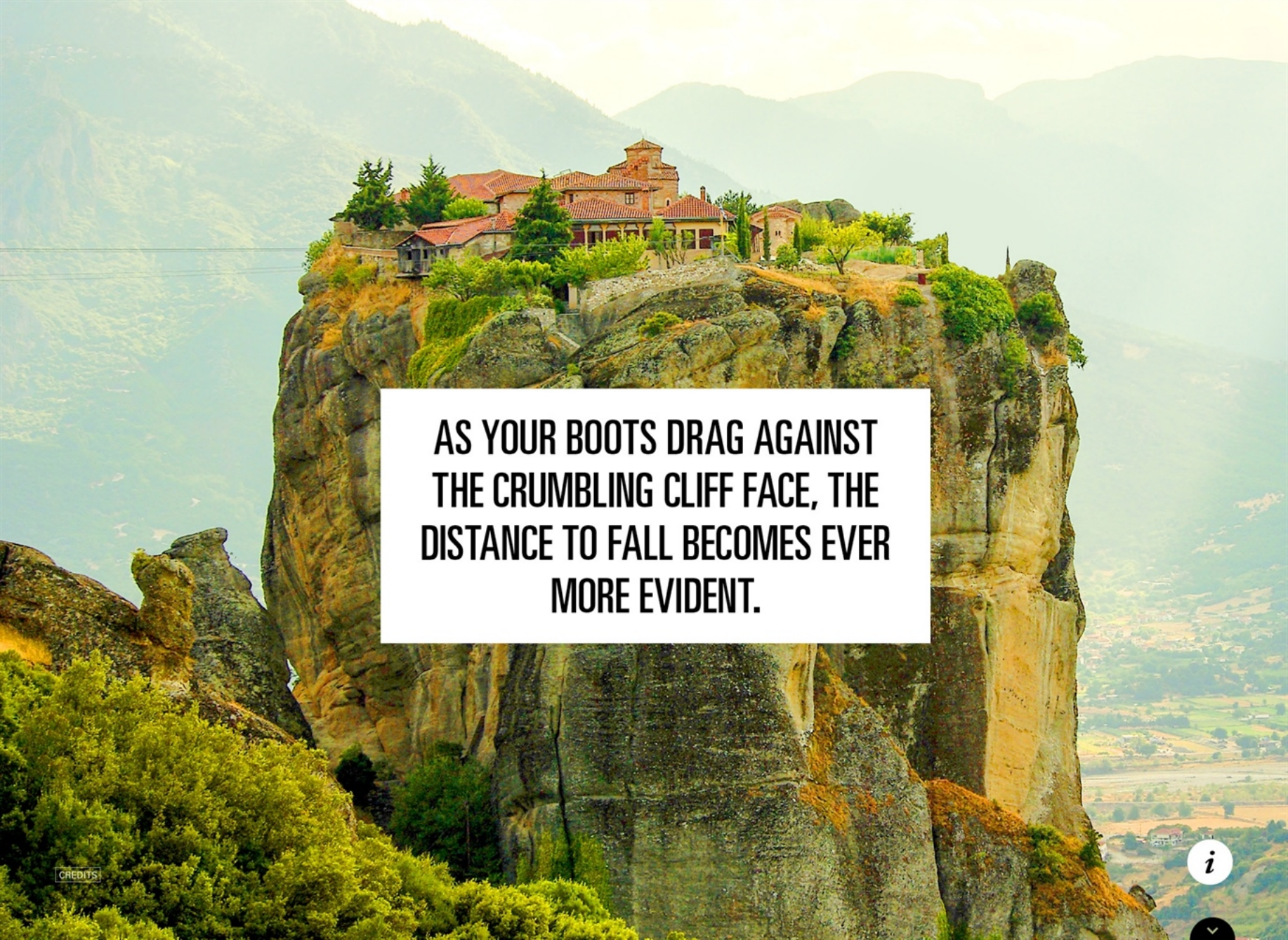


As you run between the towering sandstone yellow and slate-grey cliffs, jumping over twisted green vines and protruding leaf-covered branches in search of the perfect hiding place, away from the oncoming overcast skies and rising mists, the echo of your footsteps rings loud from a distant cave carved into the cliff of Great Metéoron. Orange sand clouds fill the air in your wake as you hurriedly run to the patch of green bushes filled with succulent, ripe, red berries and surrounded by small white mushrooms. You scoop up some pure fresh water from the stream in a folded leaf and drop a handful of berries in one by one. The shelter of the distant cave beckons.

AROUND METÉORA, STARS HAVE SHONE BOTH IN THE SKIES AND ON THE GROUND FOR WELL OVER A DECADE...

Walking through the narrow passage between 1000-metre-tall rocks, as you gaze up at the ever-changing skies and the rapidly setting sun, suddenly your foot slips into a ravine. You look down and see stones endlessly falling until a quiet thud echoes up from below. Now is the time to make possibly the biggest decision of your visit to Metéora. Do you turn around and retreat to a luxury hotel in neighbouring Kalambaka, where a warm bed and home-cooked meal await? Or do you soldier on into the unknown until you fulfil your mission to get to meet the monks of Metéora?



A photograph of a large, multi-story stone building with a red-tiled roof, likely a monastery, situated on the very edge of a massive, craggy rock cliff. The cliff face is steep and shows signs of weathering. The background features a vast, hazy mountain range under a soft, overcast sky. The foreground shows more of the cliff's edge and some green foliage.

**AS YOUR BOOTS DRAG AGAINST
THE CRUMBLING CLIFF FACE, THE
DISTANCE TO FALL BECOMES EVER
MORE EVIDENT.**



You decide to take the risk, so you pull your foot out of the ravine and hop, skip and jump over the hidden ravines just waiting to swallow up their next unsuspecting prey. Monks and nuns have travelled this death-defying road for hundreds of years, so if they could survive it then you can. The 152-metre-deep caverns echo with dull thuds as the small rocks and stones topple over the edge after every footstep.

A brisk chilly wind sweeps across your uncovered hands and face and the eerie dusk shadows follow you as the sun sets behind the sandstone towers; your stomach rumbles loudly and the pathway between the cliffs becomes



RETURN TO TOP

GREECE



GETTING THERE



GETTING AROUND



WHEN TO GO



NEED TO KNOW



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even harder to navigate. You come across a frayed rope swinging in front of you. You look up. A shadowy figure, a bony face, arms covered with a robe that appears black in the shadows of the night peers down signalling to you and whispers, “Pull yourself up my boy.” Should you trust figure with the appearance of the grim reaper but the voice of a kind old man?

The rumbles of your stomach get closer and you feel the heaviness of your eyes increasing with each passing minute so you grab the rope, slowly pulling yourself up while holding on for dear life. As your boots drag against the crumbling cliff face, the distance to fall becomes increasingly evident. You feel a cold hand wrap around your arm as the man struggles to pull you onto the dusty stone floor.

As the mysterious man stands up straight with the dying sunset behind him, you can see that he is a monk, a fellow traveller who made the same hazardous pilgrimage that you have made. He points to a colossal stone building and proudly proclaims “Great Metéoron,” and then points to the orange glow of the falling sunset. You can see all six of the legendary monasteries lined up neatly, glowing all kinds of orange and yellow. Just before you give in to your desire for sleep, the monk points down and says “Use the steps when you leave.”





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patience, breathe, keep left

A search for a natural cure to constant back pain leads to Rishikesh, the world capital of yoga.

Words and Photography by PETER MCBRIDE



I HAD COME TO THE REMOTE TOWN OF RISHIKESH, INDIA – a gateway to the Himalaya – with a vision of deep silence and lots of focused yoga. Yet something, karmic vibrations perhaps, lured me astray.

Straddling the Ganges northeast of New Delhi, Rishikesh is a shopping mall for spirituality. For those seeking enlightenment or adventurous escape – hippies, spiritual tourists, religious pilgrims, river rats – the healing power of the Ganges is a strong magnet, attracting hundreds of thousands each year. As a result, Rishikesh and its neighbouring big brother, Haridwar, are hot spots teeming with ashrams, yoga schools, white-water rafting companies and vegan restaurants (by law, the region is vegetarian and alcohol-free).



In 1968, the Beatles came to this corner of India to study transcendental meditation... and wrote some 40 songs.

In 1968, the Beatles came to this corner of India to study transcendental meditation. Ringo left early, but John, Paul and George stayed for weeks at Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's ashram and wrote some 40 songs. Many of the songs found their way onto the 1968 *White Album*. I hadn't come to write music, however, but to retune an ailing back.

Growing up on a cattle ranch in central Colorado, I forged some less than limber muscles loading hay bales – and competing in such local sports as ice hockey, ski racing and mountain biking. My idea of stretching had involved a few toe touches. Okay, shin touches, maybe. Sure, I'd attended my handful of power yoga, vinyasa flow and even Bikram classes, where the room temperature exceeds 38 degrees Celsius. The American yoga scene offered a good workout but frankly, was too distracting for me. I was that sweaty guy in the back of the studio, struggling to keep up and often more focused on the figures in front of me than on my breath. Thus the therapeutic value was limited.

My years of sports, paired now with the immutable milestones of aging, had resulted in a persistent, jarring pain in my lower spine. After I'd endured the cracks of chiropractors, the pricks of acupuncturists, even the painful kneading of Rolfers, an x-ray revealed what looked to be a photo of Jenga – that wooden-block tower game. Except my vertebrae were the blocks.

And one vertebra stuck disturbingly more inward than the rest. According to my doctor, the condition is relatively common. But if I didn't stabilise the area with core strength exercises and stretching, I would be forced to have my lower spine fused, with surgery and metal rods. Yoga, I was told, could maybe help. Enter Rishikesh, world capital of yoga. I'd put my beef-eating and coffee- and wine-guzzling habits on hold to embrace the ashram lifestyle in its motherland. Prepared to contort body and mind, I set off to find my inner om. What did I have to lose? Back surgery, for starters.

THE DISTRACTING RUMBLE of a motorcycle was not part of the yoga retuning. However, I told myself, the siren song of a classic British bike (built in India) wouldn't pull me entirely off my quest.

Motoring in second gear, I glide through dense traffic on the swaying suspension bridge. Pedestrians – some barefoot, others ornate with painted sandals and jewelled toes beneath softly swishing wraps – whisper as I weave past and around the wheeled and hoofed traffic of mopeds and sacred cows clattering across the span. There is such spatial awareness that cow horns and handlebars on vehicles coming from opposite directions occasionally touch yet avoid entanglement. Rhesus monkeys, hanging from steel cables above, study every move of every passerby, looking to snatch food and shiny objects.





After I cross the bridge, I head down an alley and turn into the back courtyard of Parmarth Niketan Ashram. I've been in residence here for three days and am in the groove and feeling squarely centred in the present moment. I'd chosen Parmarth because it is less strict than other ashrams, allowing guests to come and go. Just be back before curfew. I was also impressed by its mission to offer free medical care to those in dire need. In addition, Parmarth supports maybe 200 boys – some orphaned – called Rishikumar, providing housing, food, basic academic education, and spiritual teachings.

At 6.50 the next morning I sit in a simple room with a wooden floor, white walls, a metal roof and poster-size black-and-white photos of Pujya Swamiji smiling down on our group of students. Named 1991's 'Hindu of the Year' by *Hinduism Today* magazine, Pujya Swamiji left home at age eight to study in the Himalaya. Today he is the spiritual head of Parmarth and though he doesn't teach, he occasionally is on the scene in the evening. (I would have the honour of talking with him twice during my stay.)

As I listen to my yoga teacher, an American, I work on a breathing technique that involves inhaling and exhaling through one nostril at a time.

Patience. Breathe.

I move into the upright mountain pose and focus on absences. There are no New Age tunes pumping through hidden speakers, no distracting yoga outfits, no blinding heat, no incense and no attitude. Just students and a teacher. Before I came here, I knew something about the cultural divide between



Indian and American yoga – how some say that the Yankee infatuation with fitness has caused American yoga to stretch more in the direction of exercise. Others argue that the dichotomy is all part of yoga's ongoing evolution. Either way, I tackle the postures wearing a down jacket and long pants. Throughout much of the year, Rishikesh is hot, at times scorching. But now, in December, the mornings are frigid. I miss the music initially but quickly become aware of the Himalayan rhythms all around us: the scurrying of monkeys on the roof and the clanking of the studio's wooden shutters by glacial wind gusts.

After class, in the dining hall, I meet Ramya, one of two American yoga teachers at the ashram. She came here on a sabbatical after her children left the nest.

When I ask her about yoga's cultural divide, she smiles. "There is a saying: 'Yoga came to change America, but America changed yoga.'" I digest the observation as I embrace my first off-the-mat yogi test – eating. With little choice, my appetite submits to the Vedic diet of alkaline foods: lentils, rice, cooked veggies, spices. I quickly grow fond of the code of silence during mealtime. The quiet is broken only by the symphony of



utensils on metal plates and the recorded mantra chants played on a nine-volt radio next to the serving line.

The coffee withdrawal, at first, was cruel. The other staggering hurdle is eating cross-legged on a marble floor. My hips detest it. Small tables, maybe eight inches high, are a luxury offered mostly for Westerners. They provide little comfort.

The smiling faces of Jagdish and his neighbours offer testimony to wealth of contentment in their world of little.

During one meal, a regular ashram visitor from Brazil named Abrau points out how horridly fast I eat.

“I used to eat like you; fast as I could to get to something else.”

“I know, my tapeworm is quite active,” I say, smiling. He doesn’t laugh. “I’m kidding. Actually, I’m trying to finish my meal before my hip or knee dislocates from contorting to sit on this floor.”

He laughs. “Yes, just remember, your digestion is not in a hurry.”

“Noted. Thanks.” I felt an urge to remind Abrau about that code of silence at mealtime.

Patience. Breathe.



Over the next few days, I drift through a pattern of waking to the ashram's 5am meditative mantra chants, attending cold yoga classes before breakfast and eating meals in silence (slightly more slowly). I also begin leaving the sprawling ashram on exploratory sorties around Rishikesh and neighbouring Haridwar.

It's beyond the ashram that I discover my secret meditation weapon: the Royal Enfield motorcycle. I'd connected with its source, a man named Madhav, via Facebook. Raised in an ashram himself, Madhav abandoned the austere path the day he arrived in Rishikesh. He claims that the "power of the Ganges was so high, I couldn't leave." Today, he does the logistical heavy lifting for large groups visiting the area. He also helps with random requests from visitors like me. After I repeatedly emailed him asking the best way to get from A to B, he finally asked, gently, "Peter, would a motorcycle work for you?"

When I meet Madhav, he is smiling next to my British-designed, Indian-built 500cc bike, a shimmering classic. I can't decide which looks nicer; my motorised magic carpet or my new friend, the clean-shaven, big, smiling Madhav. I offer to pay for the rental in advance. Madhav gives a slight head wobble and responds, "No problem, Peter. You pay later." It's then I realise Madhav is one of those local folks you never want to lose, even after you have returned home.

On my first outing, I explore the crumbling ashram where the Beatles lived. As I wander the ruins, I wonder where Lennon wrote “Dear Prudence”. The lyrics “won’t you come out to play” are said to be a plea to friend Prudence Farrow, Mia’s sister, to snap out of a reclusive state of meditation. I use Lennon’s words to validate my motorcycle venture.

During sunsets, I enjoy the singing at aarti – the Hindu “happy hour” – a daily ceremony on the banks of the Ganges. Scores of Indians and a sprinkling of curious travellers sing Hindu hymns and swirl lanterns to seal prayers before splashing Ganges water on their feet. Some offer their prayers via candles that they float downstream in miniature boats made of leaves.

DESPITE SUCH BLISSFUL DAYS, I found myself anxiously wondering if the yoga classes would become more challenging, if I would learn some spine-curing contortions and become more limber. Not once had I broken a sweat in class, despite my down jacket. Was I missing something? My back ached.

Patience. Breathe.

When I bump into Madhav, who continues to help me navigate the area, steering me to the best cup of masala chai or the freshest belly-safe salad (Ramana’s Garden) – I express my concerns about my therapy.

“Peter, remember, yoga is more about the mind than the body.” He pauses. “And don’t worry so much,” he says with an easy, toothy grin, his perfectly shaved head almost glowing as he smiles. “Remember, worry is praying for what you don’t want.”





AFTER A WEEK ON THE ASHRAM ROUTINE, I LEAVE camp and motor up the Ganges on my Enfield. 'Stay left, stay left' quickly becomes my mantra as I wind past candy-striped buses and motorised rickshaws belching black clouds. Left-side driving is easy to adapt to until you forget.

Madhav had said that the Ganges' power strengthens farther upstream, an area where cave dwellings are not unusual. Snaking north, I pass bands of Rhesus monkeys fearlessly sitting in the road, awaiting scraps. I dodge rockfalls and lean hard into turns, nearly scraping my toes. In sections the road shadows the Ganges; in others, the glacial green river water flows hundreds of feet below, churning under cliffs.

Breathe. Relax. Stay left.

Cars and trucks pass three abreast, blaring trumpet-like horns that echo off the mountains. Despite many reckless passes and near misses, no-one shakes a fist or seems to shout a Hindi word of road rage. If they do, I miss it in translation.

The flow of chaotic karma keeps moving up this road. Signs written in cursive letters offer yogi-like reminders: “License to Drive, Not to Fly.”

As the sun expands into an orange ball on the horizon, I arrive at Vashista cave, thought to be the oldest meditative cave in the region. Some call it the birthplace of conscious thought. It’s also where I can catch a rowing-boat

Small tables, maybe eight inches high, are a luxury offered mostly for Westerners.

ferry across the Ganges to Anand Lok, a yoga and meditation retreat where I’ll stay for two days. First, though, I have to find somewhere to park my bike.

With dusk gathering, I notice a man cloaked in the saffron-coloured robes of a sadhu. I approach him and ask if he can help me with the bike. He opens his arms warmly and says, “Leave bike with me.” In my mind, a red flag shoots skyward. While saffron robes generally signify a “holy man” or one who has renounced the material world, rumours circulate that criminals use these same robes as a cover when in hiding. Flash decision time. I choose to stick with Madhav’s non-worry approach.



“OK, I’ll be back in a few days, and I’ll tip you nicely. Keep an eye on my baby.”
My new Enfield minder smiles. I walk to the river and up the stone beach to the ferry.

Anand Lok overlooks the Ganges on the edge of Sirasu – a village with no roads. Only one pedestrian jula (bridge) and ferry service (except during the monsoon season) connect it to the modern world. The warmest smile I’ve ever witnessed greets me on arrival. Jagdish, who is in charge of housekeeping and restaurant services, makes me feel welcome.

For the next couple of days, two fellow visitors from Parmarth—one Dutch, one Chilean—and I walk along the Ganges, drink chai to ward off the evening and early morning chill, and play with schoolchildren in the village. Throughout India, the poverty can be alarming, even overwhelming. Its bony hand reaches into every corner, including the village of Sirasu. However, the smiling faces of Jagdish and his neighbours offer testimony to the wealth of contentment in their world of little. Like many villagers, they are poor in rupees yet rich in spirit and appear remarkably happy. I ask Jagdish if he does yoga. “Yes, every day. Work is my yoga. My job keeps my body flowing.”

Motivated to keep my yoga flowing, I do sun salutations on a sandy Ganges beach one morning. A village teenager, who speaks little English, decides to drop his firewood chores and join me. As if on cue, this

rippling, muscled teen closes his eyes and falls backward, folding into an arching backbend.

“Wow,” I say. Given our language rift, we end up communicating with yoga poses and laughter. After a while, I point to the river and say, “Swim?” The boy answers with a head wobble – that ubiquitous Indian gesture that I loosely understand as “very good.”

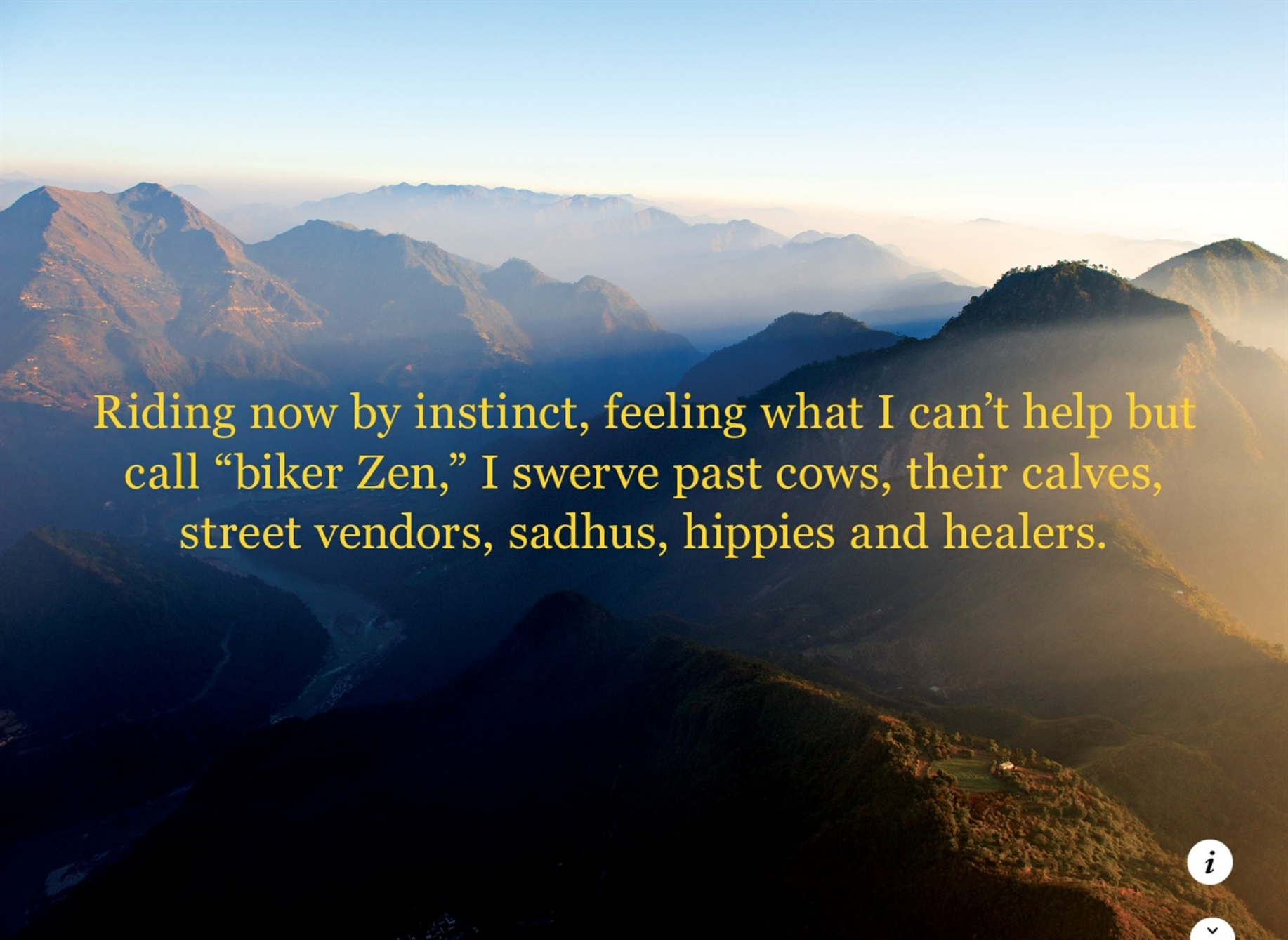
UNDER CLEAR, CRISP BLUE SKIES we strip down to boxers and dash into the icy waters of the Ganges. The blast of cold immediately steals my air and pierces me awake. Swimming in the Ganges is believed to be purifying not just physically but also symbolically, washing away all prior sins. My new swimming companion and I let out whoops as we clamber back to shore. I can’t say if my sins have vanished, but I feel electrified.

“Hello?” I say hesitantly as I enter total darkness. Rookie move. Clearly not the best way to enter an ancient meditation cave. No-one answers.

I’d left my young swimming pal, Anand Lok, and Jagdish to re-cross the Ganges and get back on the road. I also wanted to spend time in Vashista cave. Shuffling through cool, sweet air, across grain-sack flooring, I stop near candlelight, sit down cross-legged, and try to relax. Eyes closed, I focus on my breathing. My mind quickly strays. Why am I here? Has the sadhu stolen my bike?

Relax. Just a rental. Breathe.

I return the focus to my lungs. A mental rhythm aligns with my breath. I open my eyes. Suddenly, I see the entire cave. I’m alone at the end of a long tunnel-



Riding now by instinct, feeling what I can't help but
call “biker Zen,” I swerve past cows, their calves,
street vendors, sadhus, hippies and healers.

like passageway. Tokens of worship sit near candles on a stone altar. The air tastes even sweeter, fresher now.

Back outside, I glance at the time. My internal clock tells me I have meditated for maybe 10 minutes. My watch says it has been over 50. Where did I go? Parked just as I'd left it, the shiny Enfield sits up the hill, unharmed. My bike keeper magically appears.

"See, no problem," he says. "Bike here. I'm sadhu. Money."

I happily hand over a wad of rupees – about \$5 – to a man who is likely not a sadhu. He shuffles his saffron robe, quickly burying the notes in a fold, then says, "More. Hungry." I peel off a few more notes, which he gingerly takes before disappearing towards the river. I tally the parking cost: \$7.

On first kick, my bike rumbles to life. Feeling almost drugged from my Vashista time warp, I cruise, meditating on the road.

Stay left. Stay left. Stay left.

Riding now by instinct, feeling what I can't help but call "biker Zen," I swerve past cows, their calves, street vendors, sadhus, hippies and healers. I continue meditating, maintaining a laser awareness of my surroundings and my existence at this exact time in space. This precious present moment. Although I've missed my friend Madhav and the ashram, I take one more quick side trip.

Hidden in the hills just north of Rishikesh, Ananda Spa—which originally was a palace of the maharaja of Tehri Garhwal – is considered one of the best spas in the world.



The treacherous road to Ananda comes with warning signs: “Sharpest Turns Ever”; “Road Is Hilly, Don’t Be Silly”; and “After Whiskey, Driving Risky.” I feel as if the Dalai Lama is whispering in my ear as I rumble skyward. The whiskey reference is odd in light of the local dry-district regulations, but I later learn that Ananda Spa sits just beyond the district line; thus booze is available.

When I roll past a security gate into the entrance area, with its manicured gardens, a helicopter pad and a man playing bagpipes (a throwback to colonial times), I garner a few looks.

“Does the valet take motorcycles?” I ask casually. “Of course. We love Enfields,” the manager says. He adds, “But you are the first to arrive by bike. Very unique.”

I spend only a night at luxurious Ananda. I eat well (staying true to my new diet) and experience an ayurvedic treatment. Two men karate-chop my back with herb-filled bags. The only herb that has an English translation is cumin. At the end of the treatment, my back is sore but looser.

Somewhat reluctant to leave the luxe bubble, I motor downhill to the chaotic vitality that defines India. I arrive at the start of the evening aarti. Pujya Swamiji walks by. His physical frame is small, yet his presence towers.

“You’re back, Peter.”

Slightly surprised, I mutter, “Yes. Nice to see you again, Swami.”

With long, flowing, salt-and-pepper hair and beard, he glides past me, his saffron robes swaying. “Welcome home,” he adds, glowing. I return my best head wobble.

Later that night I find Madhav. He is helping organise a large international party. The schedule is tight, and Madhav was hired to make sure everything clicks like clockwork – not easy in the Indian time zone. As I wait to chat with him, he is hounded with requests. Madhav answers each with grace and a friendly “can do” yogi cool.

In the famous epic sanskrit poem “Bhagavad Gita”, Prince Arjuna has a serious discussion about life and duty with his friend Krishna, who is driving their chariot before heading into battle. Towards the end of their trip, Prince Arjuna marvels as his friend reveals his true identity: Lord Krishna. This revelation propels Arjuna toward some important truths.

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INDIA

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As I watch Madhav go about his work, it occurs to me that this quiet, ever-smiling man standing in front me – my new friend, who has effortlessly guided me throughout my trip – is my symbolic charioteer (all right, motorcycle renter, travel adviser), helping me discover my inner om.

Sure, many of the lessons I'd experienced – stretch, breathe, eat slower and more healthfully (less coffee, even), relax – are simple. And, yes, replacing the stresses of too much work and too much TV and computer screen time with crisp swims in sacred waters followed by time warps in caves and motorcycle rides through Himalayan foothills could give most folks a greater peace of mind (unless, of course, you fear motorcycles). Yet Madhav, I realise, is the walking example of that knowing soul I aspired to be. Nothing, no matter the urgency or size, derails him. He doesn't live in a cave, nor did he guide me through a single pretzel contortion. Yet he taught me, almost daily, not necessarily how to walk the "yogi path" but how to understand it better and, most importantly, that my mind needs as much stretching as my annoying back.

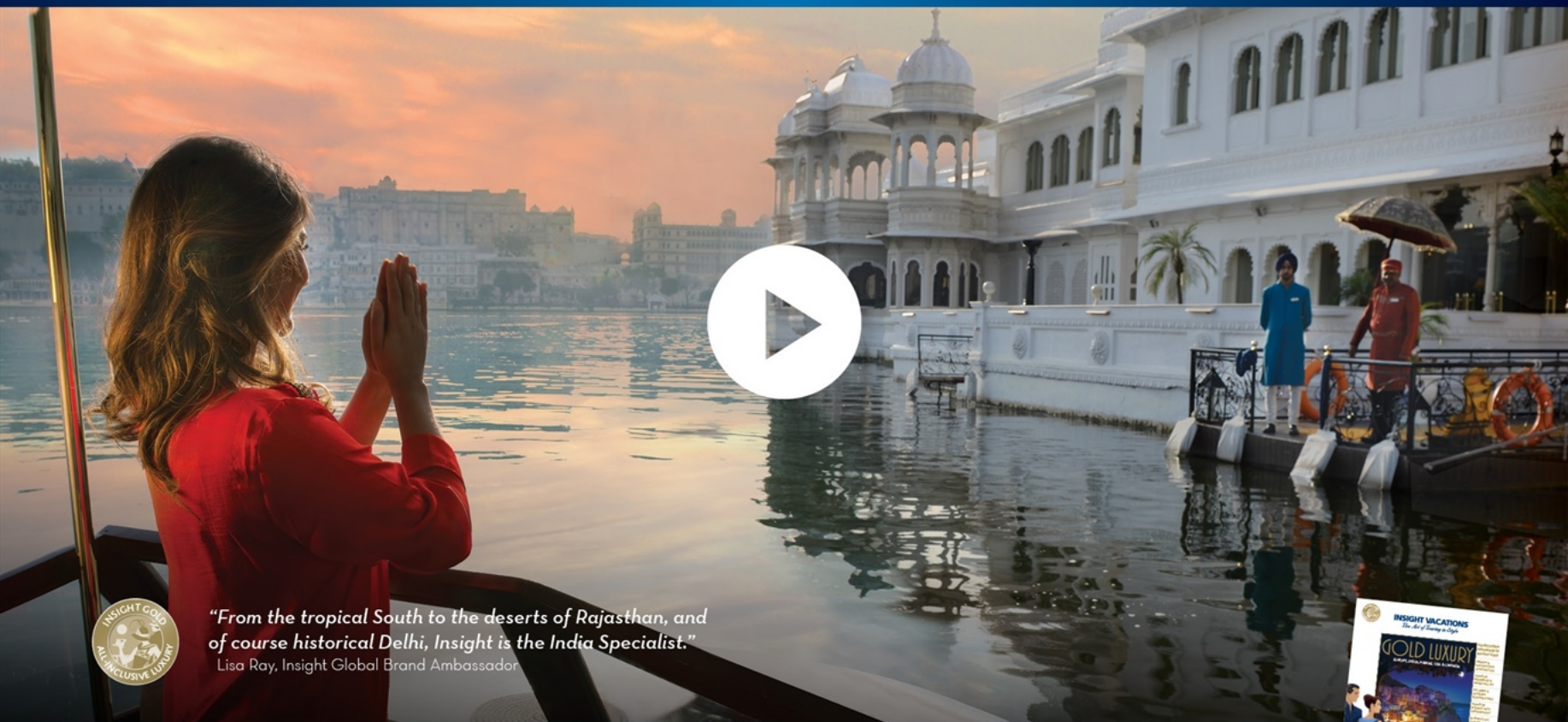
After two weeks of almost daily yoga, I can now touch my toes and even sit cross-legged through a meal. My back? The persistent pain hasn't entirely vanished, but it has subsided. Did my spine actually start to heal? I don't know, but neither I nor my inner om worries about it.

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I'm about to plunge into the water and swim towards an animal that is the size of a semi-trailer. I've waited a long time for this moment but, now that it's here, I'm questioning the wisdom of my decision. Would it be able to tell we were there? What if it bumped into us, even by accident? Exactly how big a turning circle does an 18-metre humpback whale weighing 40 tonnes need?

Kampeli, our boat captain, shouts: "Go, go NOW!" This is no time to back out.

Our snorkel-and-flipper-clad group slips awkwardly into the water, trying, with great difficulty, not to look so completely out of our depth. I'm trying to remember all the instructions we've been given. No splashing, stay close to the guide and absolutely under no circumstances try to touch the whales. Touch them? I don't plan to get that close.



WHALE SONG 01



WHALE SONG 02

CREDITS



A mother humpback whale glides within metres of us and from beneath her, a smaller version of herself peeks out to take a look.

Then, through the gin-clear sapphire-coloured water, an immense shape comes into view. Suddenly, my fears and any other thoughts vanish, replaced by an overwhelming sensation of calm and awe. The scene underwater is mesmerising. Gracefully, incredibly, a mother humpback whale glides within metres of us and, from beneath her a smaller version of herself peeks out to take a look.

The mother seems indifferent to our presence, but keeps a watchful giant eye on both us and her precious young baby. This is probably the first time that the calf has seen creatures like us, and he is inquisitive. He makes a beeline towards us and, as he twirls and pirouettes playfully around me in the water, I know I will never be content with conventional whale watching again.

The islands of Vava'u and Ha'apai in the Kingdom of Tonga are a humpback whale 'nursery', and every year between July and October several hundred whales make the annual migration from Antarctica to these warm Pacific waters to mate and give birth. Tonga is one of four places in the world where it is legal to swim with these gentle giants (the others being Niue, the Caribbean and it is now being trialled in Australia).



The islands of Vava'u and Ha'apai are a humpback whale 'nursery'.

The animals appear so trusting that it is hard to imagine we hunted them to the brink of extinction only a few decades ago. When the worldwide moratorium on humpback whaling began in 1966, fewer than 250 whales remained from an original Tongan population of about 10,000. Local hunting further threatened them until 1978, when whaling was prohibited by royal decree.

Today, the Tongan humpback whale population is estimated to be about 1000 to 2000. Local operators believe the whale-swimming industry is vital to the future of Tonga's humpbacks and the country's tourism industry. Although whales are currently protected in Tonga, that protection may be short-lived. "There are some threats to the whale-swimming industry in Tonga," says Alistair Coldrick, owner of Dolphin Pacific Diving.

"The most serious is the pro-whaling lobby, which is pushing for a return to commercial whaling and has some support within the Tongan government. The other comes from some conservation groups who believe that human interaction with whales impacts their wellbeing.

“A percentage of our profits from tours go toward whale protection and conservation and we also employ many local people. Tourism currently protects the whales; but if the industry disappears, who knows what might happen,” he says.

FROM MY EXPERIENCE WITH THE WHALES, it seems that many seem to enjoy the interactions. They seem to be as curious about us as we are about them. When they’ve had enough, they simply turn and swim away. Other times, they just appear to want to play. One time, a young mother swims directly up to our boat with her new baby and gives him lessons in whale (and possibly human) behaviour. Alongside the boat, she leaps fully out of the water. Clumsily, like a new puppy learning to find its feet, the calf tries to imitate her with a series of tiny leaps and tail slaps. In response to our cries of delight, they perform even more, seeming to enjoy the game as much as we do.





TONGA TIME

When you first arrive in Tonga, there are many signs that this is a very different place. For a start, there are people wearing woven mats wrapped around their bodies and pigs freely roam the streets. Tongan men and women wear a tupenu, which is similar to a sarong, but made of pandanus leaves. Tonga is a very conservative country, and a man can still be fined for taking his shirt off in public.

Life in this sleepy kingdom has essentially remained the same for centuries. Day-to-day, most Tongans lead a simple subsistence farming life where family and church come first. Problems are still solved the traditional way, around a bowl of kava.

The local tourism bureau promotes Tonga as ‘the place where time begins’, but you could be forgiven for thinking that time here has stood still. Sitting squarely on the International Dateline, Tonga is officially the first place on Earth to greet the sun each day. The only other things that seem to consistently be on time are the church bells (which start as early as 4.30am) and the roosters that begin crowing at dawn. Anything else to do with time is seems irrelevant.

I find this out firsthand when I try to book a local tour of the island. “Hmm, it is very difficult,” says the local tourist office rep. “But there is someone I know who may be able to take you.” And so I am introduced to Isaac, who picks me up in his van and we head out for the day, complete with lunch packed by Isaac’s mum. What follows is a very personal look at Tongan culture, visiting people’s homes where they welcome me with such warmth and generosity that I am deeply touched.





GETTING THERE



WHEN TO GO



NEED TO KNOW



MORE INFO



FAST FACT

Isaac and I continue our journey through vanilla and coconut plantations and along bumpy unsealed dirt tracks. Finally, the road runs out and he stops the van. “If you go along here a bit further you will reach the lookout,” he says, not offering to guide me. I learn that ‘a bit further’ is a subjective term in Tonga, as for the next 30 minutes I push through thick tropical jungle, dodging spiders’ webs and fallen branches.

EVENTUALLY I REACH THE CLIFF TOP and the view is breathtaking. As far as I can see there are tiny islands, and I feel as if I am the only one who has ever been here before. I’m so lost in ‘Tongan Time’ I wonder if I’ll ever be able to find my way back to my real world. When I return to the van, I find Isaac fast asleep in the front seat. I smile and think I finally understand the Tongan way.

Towards the end of my adventure, I once again find myself on the back of the boat, but this time my heart is singing. As the boat heads back to port for the last time, a mother humpback and her calf leap fully out of the water behind us, flipping their tails in a final farewell.



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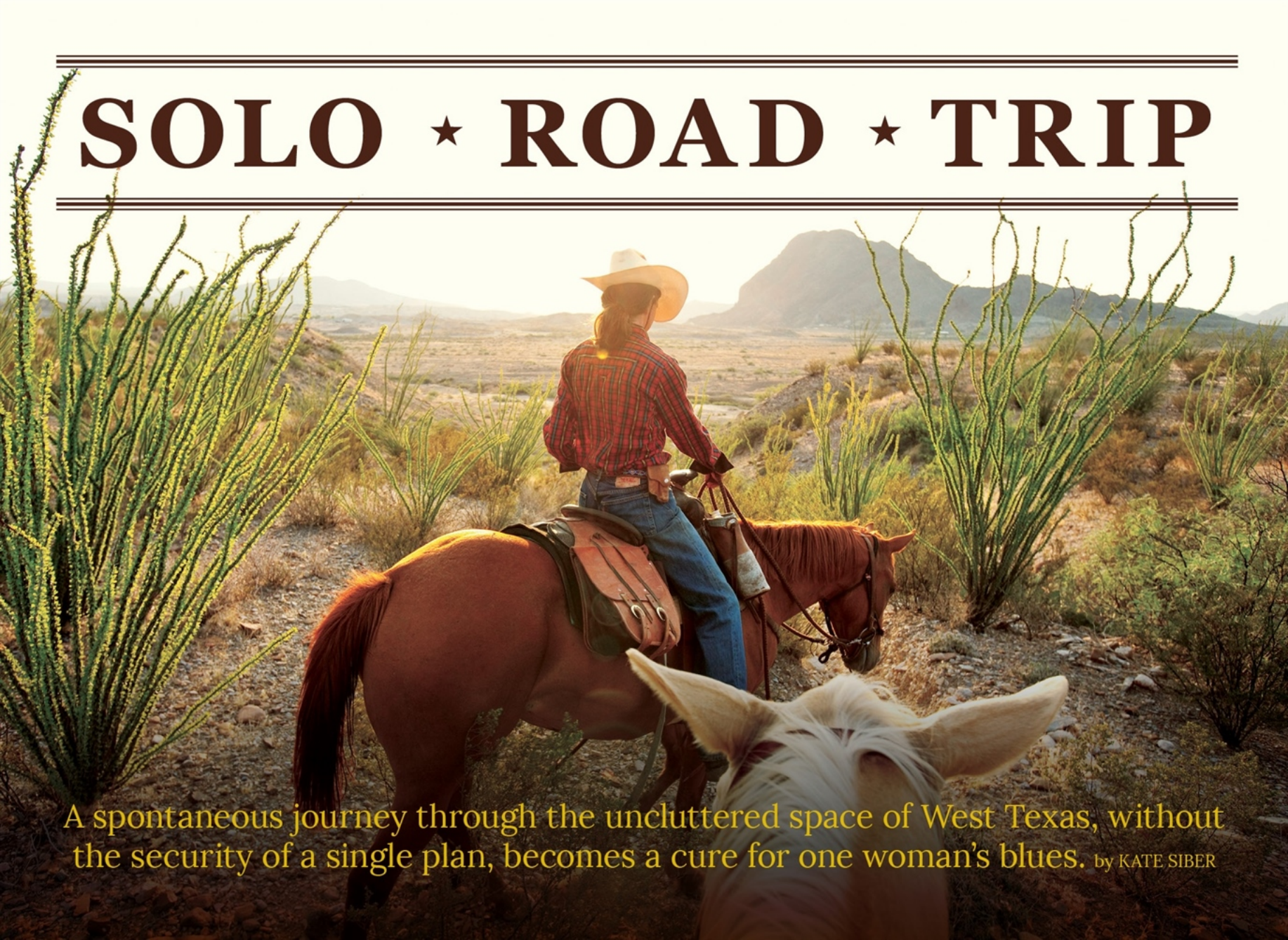
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SOLO ★ ROAD ★ TRIP



A spontaneous journey through the uncluttered space of West Texas, without the security of a single plan, becomes a cure for one woman's blues. by KATE SIBER



ON AN OTHERWISE FORGETTABLE, sun-bleached week in April, a decided-by-the-hour route leads me from my home in Durango, Colorado, through New Mexico, gravitating south almost instinctively. When I reach a crossroads – a sign for El Paso – I turn left, towards Texas. Perhaps some part of me knows that the sprawling skies and deserts of West Texas are uniquely suited to rebooting the brain. And that is precisely what I need. Over the dark winter months, a faceless depression had suffused my life, threatening to take up permanent residence. But here on the faithful road, just as the landscape turns harsh and veiled with the dust of spring winds, I start to feel the promise of a cure.



The weather warms, and the wind kicks up. I start to wake up. I stop fiddling with the radio and turn it off. I watch as the landscape – a thousand browns, yellows and the unbroken blue of the sky – stages a procession of small dramas. The grasses turn gold with sunset, and the Union Pacific clanks by with its big yellow cars. Rocky hills relent to flatlands, cows dot the vast monochrome like porcelain figurines and abandoned farmsteads cling to the land as reminders of past hope. The uncluttered landscape invites my mind to do the same.

I roll through an old ranching and railroad town, Marfa, now popular among artists, where galleries inhabit 1950s gas stations and turn-of-the-century storefronts. “This is where the trouble happens,” says a man nursing a pint as I slide onto a barstool at Padre’s, a dark cavern of a bar with rows of tequila. He smiles. He introduces himself as Carlos, and his friend as Rico.

“How’d you get here?” asks Rico.

“I got in my car and just wound up here.” My explanation seems utterly inadequate, but they nod, satisfied. Stranger things must happen in Marfa, where the expanse of desert beyond the movie-set-like facades allows a freedom of mind untenable elsewhere. Even the bar’s motley assortment of patrons – a leathery wire of a cowboy, skinny hipsters in ironic T-shirts, a handful of stone-faced farmhands – reflects the town’s live-and-let-live attitude. I feel strangely peaceful.

Now a long way from home with no reservations or places to be, I decide to camp in a field for the night. Alone in the darkness, under the ghostly light

of an almond moon, I could easily spook myself. After all, just outside town, mysterious glowing orbs – the unexplained Marfa Lights – have unnerved visitors for decades. But instead, a surprise: I feel just fine.

Desperation had spurred my hasty departure a few days earlier. The winter had been tough: my career as a writer felt stalled, I struggled with back pain from a yoga injury and a breakup with my boyfriend of four years left me drained and morose. At a time when I felt I should have things in order, the disarray of my life's great themes overwhelmed me. That uncertainty left me grappling for control. I needed to loosen up. I decided to practise letting go on the road—to take a trip without the comfort of a single plan. If nothing else, a change of scenery might be a temporary palliative. Before I could change my mind, I cleared 19 days of my calendar, crammed my car with food, clothes, books and camping equipment, and set off.



In my first few days on the road, I catch myself looking for answers in a road atlas. It dawns on me that in order to truly let go, I must simply accept whatever comes my way, whether beautiful or boring. So I decide that every time I come to a major fork in the highway, I will pick a direction like picking a straw out of a hat.

In an El Paso Walmart, I watched a plain-faced woman in soldier fatigues stop to contemplate a rack of pretty lipsticks.

In Terlingua, Texas, a revived ghost town on the edge of Big Bend National Park, I linger to chat with a shopkeeper. She says it's a shame I came this year; the dust and cold killed the spring flowers before they'd even bloomed. No rain had come in nine months, and the smoke from 60,000 hectares of wildfire darkens the air. But I've never been here before, I tell her, and with no expectations, I think it's gorgeous.

South of a wide swathe of bland desert, Big Bend is a prize of rivers, mountains, canyons and big wildlife, including bears and mountain lions. But I don't know any of that yet. I simply spot it on my map one day and point south. As I drive the improbably spiky Chisos Mountains, day softens to evening, shrouding the cliffs in an ethereal haze. I claim the campground's last site, cook dinner on my stove and sip tea as the sun sets over a pair of toothy peaks. The campground eventually stills to silence, interrupted only

A photograph of a long, straight, empty asphalt road with a double yellow line down the center, stretching towards the horizon. The road is flanked by dry, yellowish-brown grass and a wire fence. In the distance, there are low mountains under a bright blue sky filled with large, white, fluffy clouds.

**A long, straight, empty road is the best tonic
for melancholy. This I learn in West Texas.**

by the cooing of a distant dove and the occasional thrush of the wind through the trees.

Serendipitously, the next day I run into an acquaintance from college, Derek, on the Lost Mine Trail. I persuade him to join me on a mission that evening: a full-moon hike to the Langford Hot Springs on the Rio Grande, a series of large pools that collect in the foundations of a long-gone early 20th-century bathhouse.

Without our footfall, there is nothing but silence, deep and flawless.

Setting off from the trailhead at sunset, we see no other souls except several distant javelinas (a type of native boar) as we enter a landscape unlike any I've visited. The desert plants are perfectly spaced as if set in the gravel by some unseen gardener.

When we arrive at the springs we strip to our swimsuits and slip in, instantly melting into the steamy pools. In silence, we watch the full moon rise, reflecting on the river and casting long cactus shadows. We get to talking, idly, about our hopes for the next decade, for good health and fewer failed relationships and whatever fulfillments we haven't yet found. As our bodies marinate, the words wash lazily out of our minds, as if we are silently making a pact not to hold each other accountable.

On the way back, the wind dies and the moon shines a platinum floodlight over the landscape. The crunch of our footsteps in the gravel lulls me into a meditative trance.

Derek stops in his tracks. “Wait,” he says. “Listen.” Without our footfall, there is nothing but silence, deep and flawless. I hold my breath and listen intently for something, anything – the slam of a car door, the bark of a faraway dog. There is nothing. “It’s almost as if we’re suspended in a diorama,” Derek says in a reverent whisper. I wonder if the silence is that much more wondrous because I had never dreamed or expected it.

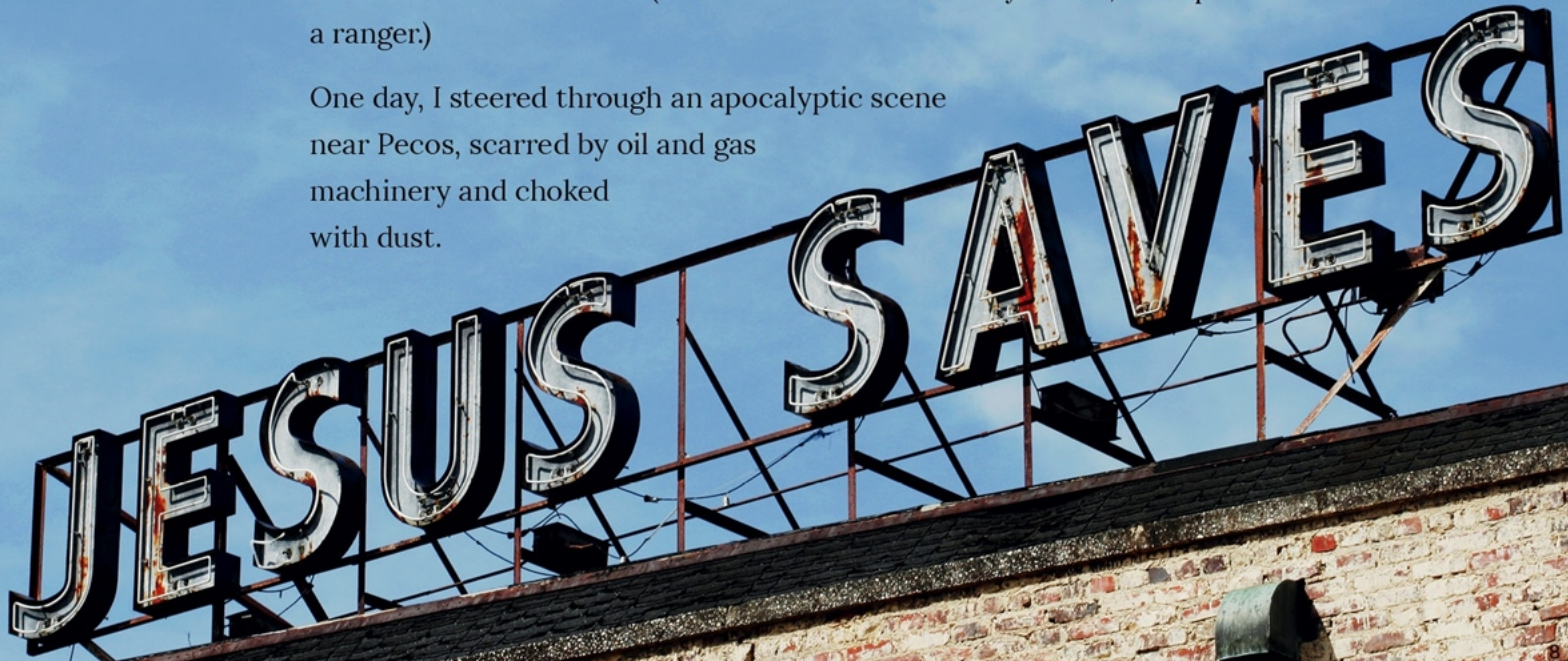
The next day, as I drift farther east through the Texas borderlands along Highway 90, I realise that such moments could never be planned. And perhaps it is that insistence on controlling every aspect of life that prevents me from living all of it – the moments of joy, amazement, fear and doubt that constantly arrive and depart.

In San Antonio, a startlingly large city moated by malls and office plazas, I follow a sign for the Alamo, then splurge on a hotel room with an 11th-floor view of the fortress cum tourist hive. That evening, I ramble along the River Walk, a strip of riverside restaurants and hotels in an arms race of lights, candy-coloured umbrellas and thumping pop music. Feeling a twinge of loneliness, I stop to watch the water glitter with reflections and notice movement. Two ducks, and eight ducklings the size and shape of pears, flutter in a jumble of downy feathers. I wonder how much time I spend not noticing life as it happens.

IN THEIR BEST MOMENTS, spontaneous trips offer a view of a place otherwise hidden when you're willing to see only its most beautiful parts. In an El Paso Walmart, I watched a plain-faced woman in soldier fatigues stop to contemplate a rack of pretty lipsticks. In Big Bend, I lounged in the hot shade with an old cowboy on an impromptu holiday from Carrizo Springs, Texas. "Isn't it nice to be on your own?" he says, reading my mind. "If I was home my wife'd have me on a tractor ploughin' some field."

Of course, many moments of unsystematic trips are not beautiful or noteworthy. I ate iceberg lettuce salads in plastic bowls at lonely truck stops in Sanderson and Three Rivers. A merciless wildfire chased me out of Balmorhea State Park in West Texas. ("Get out of here as fast as you can," deadpanned a ranger.)

One day, I steered through an apocalyptic scene near Pecos, scarred by oil and gas machinery and choked with dust.





GETTING THERE



GETTING AROUND



WHEN TO GO



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MORE INFO

But just as unceremoniously as they arrive, those unlovely places give way to something new. Nearing the Gulf Coast, I realise I can let the landscape, whether wild and open or strangled by development, simply pass through me in all its beauty or shame.

And with that understanding, the uncertainty of the road brings me unexpected comfort.

In Corpus Christi, I drive through a sprawling atrocity of strip malls lined with EZ Pawns, payday loan shops, Mexican restaurants named El Paraiso, and churches with neon signs: Jesus Saves. Then, suddenly, as if someone flicked off the lights, the towering signs disappear and there is nothing but highway embraced by black – the ocean. I cross the causeway, and soon I'm sailing through the waving grasses and pristine sand dunes of the Gulf Coast's undeveloped Padre Island, the wind a howl against my windows, the sky dark and infinite.



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A wide-angle photograph of a Patagonian landscape. In the background, a massive glacier with dark, rocky outcrops extends into the sea. The water is a deep, clear blue, dotted with numerous icebergs of various sizes. A red and white ship is visible on the left side of the water. The foreground shows a rocky shoreline with brown and orange hues. The sky is bright blue with wispy white clouds.

Patagonia: in the lost land of

THE GIANTS

THE NORTHERN HALF OF MYTH-LADEN PATAGONIA IS FULL OF DEEP BLUE LAKES AND TEMPERATE RAINFORESTS, DINOSAUR FOSSILS AND NOMADIC GAUCHOS. by CHRIS MOSS



Getting lost can be a good thing. For some reason, I'd noted the name of the hotel in northern Patagonia – La Escondida – but hadn't double-checked to make sure it was the only one. When I arrive and ask for my key, the reality dawns: I'm five hours south of my destination, hungry and worn out.

I change plans and stay put for the night. La Escondida means 'the hidden one'. Perhaps it's fate.

I wander outside to walk to a restaurant a short distance away. A car pulls over.

"Want a lift, Maestro?"

"Sure," I say.

Patagonia slows Argentines down; makes them friendlier, more generous. Ten minutes later, my new amigo, Lautaro, and I are eating salmon empanadas (stuffed bread) and trout sorrentinos (huge, round ravioli) with wild mushrooms, and guzzling some good local sauvignon blanc. The restaurant is supposed to be closed but the waiters have opened the kitchen early for us.

During dinner, I tell Lautaro, who's from the city of Rosario, I've taken the wrong road. He assures me one road is as good as the next, and anyway, in Patagonia everything is the same.

I'd started my trip into Neuquén Province at the state capital, also called Neuquén. Landing there after a bumpy, 90-minute flight from Buenos Aires, I'd picked up a hire car and hit Route 22 and Route 237 heading south west towards the lake district, hugging the north Patagonian Andes.



PHOTO GALLERY





GETTING LOST CAN
BE A GOOD THING

JUST 20 MINUTES OUT OF THE AIRPORT, I'm free of the suburbs and driving across a brown, dusty plain. For rational people, the Patagonian Steppe is a repellent badland. Its native flora is harsh and thorny. The soil is dry and rocky. The wind is flattening and the sun sears the skin. But this very harshness makes for visual treats. As I drive, I watch dust devils dancing over the tablelands, and the shadow of cumulus clouds drift along the castellated canyons. At Picún Leufú, 'city of the wind', I feel my car veer as it's punched by the gusts. The wind in Patagonia has mythic status; aviator and author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry said it made his small planes fly backwards. The reason for this force is simple: it blows in from hundreds of kilometres away, sometimes from Antarctica, and its path meets no obstacle whatsoever.

The hue of the land changes slowly. Olive-green gives way to rust-orange as ravines open up in the crust, and then huge lakes and dammed rivers add surreal splashes of blue and green in a place where rain hardly ever falls.

Neuquén Province is one of the world's great centres for palaeontology. As I turn a bend, I see a huge, mean-looking dinosaur towering over the road. A plastic one, with a sign and an arrow telling me to go to the fossil park at Villa El Chocón, a small dam-workers' settlement, where I while away a couple of hours. The dark-red sedimentary rocks here have preserved bones and footprints of the beasts that roamed here in the Cretaceous period, about 100 million years ago. At the Museo Paleontológico Ernesto Bachmann, I see the fossilised remains of the 15-metre-long, 10-tonne *Gigantosaurus carolinii*, the big brother of *Tyrannosaurus Rex*.



In 1987, at nearby Plaza Hunicul, a fossil-hunter found the vertebrae of *Argentinosaurus huinculensis*, a herbivore believed to have weighed over 100 tons – the equivalent of a 20-strong herd of elephants. Its thighs were as big as a bus and its backbone could have served as a Big Dipper. The landscape around the humdrum little town is lunar, and you have to close your eyes to imagine this huge, lumbering creature peacefully grazing on plants and leaves – at least until the *Gigantosaurus* came along to spoil dinner.

Apart from the occasional buzzard, no beasts interrupt the rest of my peaceful journey, and while the dun-coloured steppe is mesmerising, it's a real relief to see the snow-coloured peaks on the horizon: the Andes – complete with forests, lakes, and life.

A woman in a blue jacket and grey shorts is hiking on a rocky trail in the foreground. She is holding a trekking pole and looking towards the camera. The landscape is a vast, scenic view of a mountain range with several sharp, snow-capped peaks. In the middle ground, there are turquoise lakes and small islands. The sky is blue with large, white, fluffy clouds. The overall scene is a beautiful, high-altitude landscape.

INTO THE LAKES

AFTER A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP in the wrong – but welcoming – ‘hidden’ hotel, I aim north. I refuel in Villa La Angostura, an ersatz alpine town that the second-home crowd from Buenos Aires thinks is adorable but which would fail to impress most European travellers. From here, I drive along one of Argentina’s most celebrated backroads. The Ruta de los Siete Lagos (Seven Lakes Road) runs between Villa La Angostura and San Martín de los Andes, as it winds through the Andean Precordillera for around 110 kilometres. The road followed Route 234 until, in 2004, this was absorbed by Route 40 (Argentina’s great western highway) – diverted through the lake district in a bid to boost tourist traffic. And while it touches seven lake shores, it actually passes close to a dozen lakes; all distinct, all beautiful. These cool, blue pools are the remnants of glaciers that melted only a few thousand years ago (in Patagonia’s south, they’re still withdrawing).

Fringed by temperate rainforest and dominated by the southern beech, they were – until the late 19th century – off the map for all but the most intrepid travellers. It was explorer Francisco Moreno – known in Argentina as El Perito (The Expert) – who first explored and mapped the lake lands in the 1870s. As a thank you, the government rewarded him with a huge tract of land. In 1903, Moreno donated it to the state so the Nahuel Huapi National Park – the oldest park in the Argentine lake district – could be established.

The first lake I spot is named after its surroundings, Nahuel Huapi, and said to be home to a Nessie-like serpent called Nahuelito. I see no sign of him, but do spot Bariloche, the region’s main city, many miles away on the opposite coast. Nahuel Huapi’s surface area is 544 square kilometres; it has waves on it

like an inland sea and, under a cloudy sky, looks forbidding. I park up at Lago Espejo (Mirror Lake) and head into the woods. The weather is cooler and far more humid than on the steppe and I can hear the cheeky call of the chucaco tapaculo, a thrush-sized bird that lives in the undergrowth in the beech forests. A couple of tents are pitched on the grey-sand beach beside the lake and I can see a backpacker barbecuing his breakfast and sipping yerba mate tea from a gourd.

The lake district is the area of the Patagonian Andes closest to Buenos Aires and Neuquén has long been a favourite with students, school groups and budget travellers. This makes it more authentically Argentine than the far south, where the expensive flights and hotels tend to draw mainly wealthy gringos. Ernesto 'Che' Guevara passed through the lake region on his famous motorcycle trip of 1952, the first of many gap-year dreamers to choose the Andes for a rite of passage.

I'm here just before Christmas, when the local holiday season kicks in. It's peaceful in the forest, but walking is quite a trial – temperate rainforest left to itself is full of fallen trunks and knotted branches and I have to clamber to make headway. I spot woodpeckers working high up and turkey vultures wheeling above the clearings. Soon, I have very little idea where the lake is; it's easy to become disoriented in these path-less forests. Eventually, I pop out on a shore where Andean geese are feeding, a breeze rippling the lake.

At Lago Villarino I stop at a lay-by and take in the deep blue of another flora-fringed lake; there's the red anemone-like notros, the yellow michay, the



common chilco, with its purple heart surrounded by red arteries, indigenous coligüe bamboo, the myrtle-related arrayán tree and a few monkey puzzles. Some of the beech trees are dotted with orange, golf ball-like llao llao fungus. On the opposite side of the road are large nalca ferns, dripping with water from a stream.

VILLARINO IS THE MOST IMPRESSIVE LAKE, set in what looks like a gigantic amphitheatre of mountains, one of them topped by an anvil-like flat rock. There's even snow on the lower peaks.

At Lake Falkner – named after a Jesuit missionary from England's Manchester who explored Patagonia in the 18th century – I can see the anvil from the other side. Here, too, is a long, sandy beach and trees suited to hammocks and picnics. A little further along, I find a waterfall split in two by a jutting rock, and sit beneath it for half an hour, the lowering sun on my face.



ALONE ON THE RANGE

THE SPANIARDS PRETTY MUCH IGNORED THE SOUTHERN ANDES,

lacking as they did any silver or gold mines. Before the Argentines settled in the region at the end of the 19th century, the native Mapuche were the rulers of these lands. Place names still evoke their memory – nahuel means ‘tiger’; neuquén means ‘drafty’; hua hum, the name of the pass linking Argentina and Chile, means ‘place where it rains a lot’ – and to the north of the Seven Lakes Road are reserves, and even ski resorts, run by Mapuche communities.

After a long road trip, there’s nothing like a home on the range. After passing through San Martín de los Andes – another faux-alpine township the locals love – I take a right onto an unpaved back road. I’ve been told to look for the Cerro de los Pinos estancia (estate), but it’s taking forever to find it.

The sun’s setting – the ‘golden hour’ for photography; I stop to snap a striking, arrowhead-shaped mountain. I’m back on the steppe, but a warmer, less windy place than where the dinosaur bones were found, with Andean foothills visible to the west. I spot a gaucho riding – or, by the looks of the taut reins and prancing hooves, breaking in – his horse. I ask him to point the way. He tells me to follow and we head off to a tree-lined avenue at the end of which is the estancia’s entrance.

The Cerro de los Pinos was founded by French settler Santiago de Larminat in 1909. It’s still a working ranch, rearing both cattle and sheep and now run by Santiago’s grandchildren. There’s a chapel, the ruins of a blacksmith’s and a chichería – a press for making the local apple-based grog, chicha. I spot an ancient wooden bridge that Santiago had built over one of the rivers, now rotten and falling apart.





A cosy, tree-shaded corner of the 20,000-hectare estate is occupied by a smart lodge, Tipiliuke, famed among anglers for its proximity to two rivers bursting with trout, the Chimehuín and Quilquihue. My host, Kevin Tiemersma, an Argentine of Dutch extraction, shows me how to read the river. He talks about giving the fly ‘action’ and looking for movements, currents, light, air pressure and each fish’s daily habits. With every cast he seems to reel in a big brown or a rainbow.

From high up, I note the rivers here are not single, flowing lines, but a maze of watercourses. The play of the light on the fast-flowing Chimehuín, framed by the still, tree-less grasslands, is stunning. Some travellers say the Patagonian Steppe is monotonous, but it’s not – it’s merely a question of looking and watching the moods change.





GETTING THERE



GETTING AROUND



WHEN TO GO



NEED TO KNOW



MORE INFO



SHOW ALL

In the early evening, we barbecue. I help out, carving the huge flank steaks and ribs. Patagonian lamb is sublime, but the beef, from the estancia, is as good as anything I've eaten in boastful Buenos Aires. We splash it with chimichurri, the herby-vinegary sauce of the pampas, and heaps of salt, working up a thirst for all the malbec we're going to drink.

FIELD FLICKER WOODPECKERS and pretty monjita birds flit around the scrub when I set off for a solo walk on my last day. I walk high above the river – blueish, with brown patches, glistening as it snakes through green-and-gold grassland. Framing it all, low, dun-coloured hills and a dark grey sky; storms often threaten but rarely come during my visit.

The land becomes more classically Patagonian: tufts of tough coirón grass and prickly, dome-shaped neneo bushes. Everything appears created to withstand harsh winters. If this region's glaciers, forests and lakes are its vivid brushstrokes, then the dizzyingly vast steppe is the canvas. But I'm heading for a landmark: the top of the dramatic peak I saw on my drive in. It's the estancia's namesake, Tipiliuke, a Mapuche word meaning 'upside-down heart'. The climb's tough, the wind really beginning to whip as I scramble up a steep face of scree and loose rocks. But at the summit, I'm higher than anything else around me – with the great flat plain on one side, curving off all the way to the Atlantic, and the Andes range on the other, with its weather and its white peaks. I'm alone for a while, and then a group of horseback riders arrive, having left their mounts at the foot of the upside-down heart. It's too windy to talk, so we all sit around, beneath a large cross, gazing out into empty space.



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PHOTO GALLERY | *The Giants*

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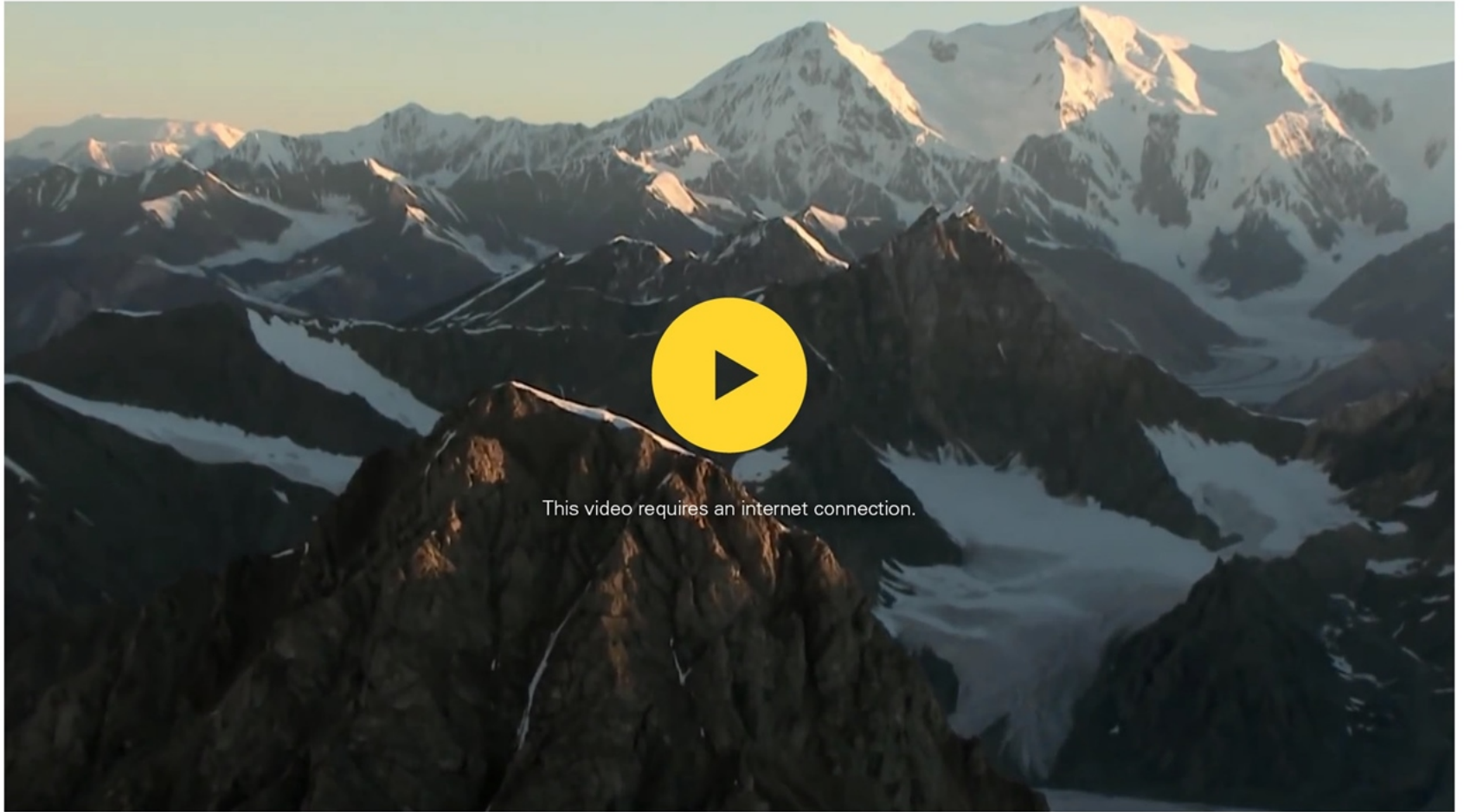
There's a world of snow, ice and glaciers in the towering peaks of Kluane National Park in the Yukon – a peaceful place where it's winter all year and the mountains keep growing.

by MICHELLE HESPE

A WORLD OF WINTER WILDERNESS



>VIDEO



TRUEWILD: KLUANE (23:28)

Experience the awe and wonder of Kluane National Park and Reserve through artist Cory Trépanier's month-long Kluane expedition.

truewild.ca



“SHE’S A STURDY OLD PLANE!” shouts pilot Tom Bradley over the 1966 Helio Courier’s hearty engine rumble, grinning from ear to ear as he anticipates another hour-long journey into one of his favourite places in the world.

The four-seater plane lifts gracefully off the tarmac at an isolated airstrip about 200 kilometres west of the Yukon’s capital – Whitehorse. The land below is painted in the colours of a Canadian autumn and as we ascend, canola-yellows and mottled-browns melt into swathes of deep-green spruce and pine trees that have begun to resemble LEGO trees fanned along the banks of Kluane Lake. Before the plane reaches a height of a few thousand metres, the footprints of grizzly bears and the small white figures of long-horned dall sheep can still be spotted at a squint.

The plane follows Slims River and smoothly soars on towards the legendary icefields of Kluane National Park, a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site. The colours steadily become more muted, and then, up ahead of us is a sprawling vistas in all manner of whites against a blue sky filled with tumbling cumulus clouds.

Further still we delve into Kluane’s icefields, where the grey-brown jagged slopes of the wild glacial landscape have been replaced by snow and ice, at first just in the form of thousands of metres of snow piled like icing sugar on to the barren landscape. And then an entire world of winter emerges: remote and spectacular in its height, width and expanse. And there, in the middle of it all like a highway from a land of giants, is the majestic Kaskawulsh Glacier, sporting sparkling cracks in its surface big enough for semi-trailers to





CREDITS



***IT'S A PHOTOGRAPHER'S DREAM –
IF THERE WAS AN IDEAL FILM SET
DEPICTING HEAVEN, THIS IS AS GOOD AS IT
WOULD GET.***

disappear in without a trace. Into some crevasses you could toss a few hotels and they wouldn't even touch the sides.

The glacier is 700 to 1000 metres deep in places, forced over thousands of years to wind its way around the massive mountain bases. The sun has melted its surface in places, to form what look like small ice-blue pools from the air. But in reality they are the size of lakes and rivers. From the height of 3300m that we've now climbed to, the glacier almost looks fragile in its stolid beauty. It streams steadily off into the distance, to where Mount Logan stands tall as the king of the St Elias Mountains. At 5959 metres in height, Logan is the tallest peak in Canada and in terms of girth, she's the biggest mountain in the world.

The spectacular icefields are two thirds of the 21980 square-kilometre Kluane National Park & Reserve – about 10,000 square kilometres – and they are home to 14 of North America's highest mountains. There are more than 20 summits higher than 4,200 metres and the region has the largest accumulation of mountains on the continent. Not including the polar caps of the Arctic and Antarctica, we are flying through the largest icefields on the planet.





One of the many fascinating things about the mountains of Kluane National Park is that they are still growing: a seismograph in the Visitor Reception Centre at Haines Junction (a 45-minute drive from the airstrip) records hundreds of annual tremors, meaning the St Elias Mountains are being pushed skyward becoming taller by the day. They grow about a metre a year. However, in terms of ice and snow mass, there is evidence that this winter wilderness is declining, with researchers from the University of Ottawa suggesting the St Elias Mountain ranges are “among the largest non-polar sea level contributors in the world.”

The plane continues its smooth path through a world where winter is the only season, and down below William’s Icefield Discovery Camp comes into view – a base where those wanting to ski, climb or explore the ranges can spend one to three days in the wild, white wilderness. In every direction, mountains, ice and glaciers frame gigantic expanses of untouched snowfields that have any skiers or snowboarders who see them itching to be let loose.

It’s a photographer’s dream landscape – if there was an ideal film set depicting heaven, this is as good as it gets. Just pop in those pearly gates and a gathering of angels.

Tom, who has been a pilot in New Zealand for the past decade, circles around his new playground, the smile having no chance of being removed from his face. “I just can’t get over this place,” he says. “It’s unbelievable. I know I keep saying it, but look at Mount Logan – the biggest mountain by girth in the world. Isn’t that just amazing? And we’re the only ones out here, with all this space.”





GETTING THERE



WHEN TO GO



NEED TO KNOW

After an hour or so lapping up the jaw-dropping scenery, Tom reluctantly follows the glacier's path back to the Ice Discovery airstrip. Soon, the medley of moody whites is replaced by a warm day in the Yukon – an autumnal world bathed in sunshine and topped off with perfectly blue skies. One of the passengers cries out as they spot a grizzly bear ambling through a swatch of spruce trees, nose close to the ground as it sniffs out worms and other forest treats.

Then we're gliding in above a glassy lake that mirrors the mountains, touching down and rolling to a stop. When the Courier's blades are still, we face the fact that our icefield adventure is over, while Tom excitedly refuels in preparation for his next. We climb out of the little plane and as we cross the tarmac – hot from the sun – it's hard to believe that in the peaks of Kluane National Park, a world of winter is there every day – cold, bright and slowly shifting – with some of the tallest mountains in the world ever-so-slowly reaching new and astounding heights.

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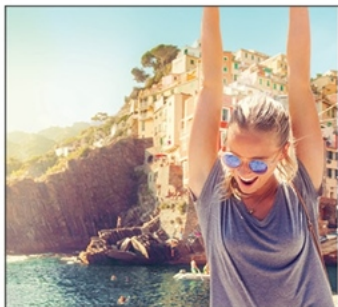


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LANDSCAPES Where can you stand in 'the green heart of Italy?'



4



SPORT Who are the current holders of football's European Championship?

CAPITAL CITIES Which port city is the capital of Portugal?



6

CURRENCY What currency will you need if buying spices at the Grand Bazaar?



FESTIVALS When do Spanish children open most of their Christmas presents?



8

ENTERTAINMENT In which city do Romeo and Juliet fall in love?



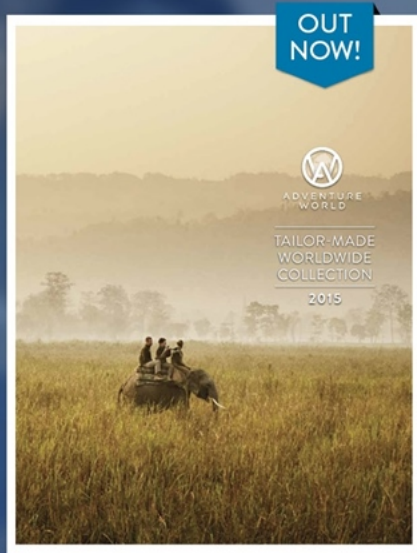
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CHRIS MOSS lived in Buenos Aires for a decade while working as an arts writer for the *Buenos Aires Herald*. He wrote a book about Patagonia's cultural history and has edited several guides to South America. He now lives in south-west Wales.



“I’ve brushed shoulders with anacondas, jaguars, caiman and polar bears, but being only a narrow river away from huge grizzlies in remote Kamchatka was about as wild as I’d ever want it to get.” – Chris Moss



KRIS MADDEN’S travels have taken her to more than 60 countries and she’s worked as an expedition leader and guide in Antarctica, Russia and the South Pacific.

“My most hairy travel experiences include running aground in Antarctica where we had to evacuate the ship; and being forced to land in a light aircraft in a remote airport in Rwanda, which was under military coup. It was touch and go in both cases: firstly sailing across the Drake Passage in a ship with three holes in its hull; and secondly wondering whether the guys wielding machine guns would eventually let us go.”



GUY WILKINSON is a freelance writer and photographer and a vinyl fetishist based in Newcastle, Australia.

“One mad travel experience began with a bag of smuggled beer on a rooftop in Chefchaouen, Morocco. It involved a night bus to Tangier, tinsel, pot hole-ravaged roads and the creeping realisation that I’d forgotten to make a hotel reservation. The result was a very long night spent in a back alley clutching a pocketknife while waiting for the morning ferry.”



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